Research of the Relationship between Educational Development and Social Change in China

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Abstract. The rapid development of education in China has been noticed by the whole world, as well as the rapid growth of the entire country. This paper explores the dramatic development of education in China amidst significant social changes, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between these two elements. Through analysis of the development of education in some periods: in ancient times, the 20th century, and the 21st century. It is found that social change significantly influences educational development, while education, in turn, acts as a tool for social change, facilitated by government intervention. This unique relationship, shaped by China's centralized control and emphasis on nationalism, suggests that similar relationships might exist in other countries, albeit varying in strength depending on their governance systems. Furthermore, based on the relationship between education, governance, and social change, this paper proposes that distance education, to some extent, can help alleviate regional educational inequality which is identified as a notable contemporary issue in Chinese education.

Keywords: Social change, Chinese education, educational inequality.

1. Introduction

Education is always recognized as an important field as it covers cutting-edge research and talent cultivation in various fields. Every country's education has its characteristics and China's education is renowned all over the world for the fierce competition in gaokao and its organized exam-oriented curriculum. Apart from that, the establishment of the imperial examination system which has lasted for thousands of years, and the establishment of the education system from scratch after the founding of China, as well as the continuous reform of the education system in line with the rapid economic development, are also very impressive. Thus it can be seen that there are specific education systems and reform directions in different historical periods. This paper argues that there is a certain relationship exists between education and social change and it will be analysed in the context of China.

2. Development of Education in China

In this section, by recalling the development of education in China over time, the link between the development of education and centralized power can be discerned.

2.1. Imperial Examination and Education System in Ancient China

When it comes to education in ancient China, it is inevitable to mention the imperial examination system that has existed for 1,300 years in Chinese history, which has had a great impact on education in China at that time and even in China nowadays. In ancient China, the development of schools is closely related to the imperial examination that lasted for 1300 years in Chinese history. Because the previous system of selecting officials lacked a uniform standard and was easily monopolized by bureaucrats and dignitaries. The imperial examination in China was then set by the imperial court to seek talents for the country from the general population. Since the establishment of the imperial examination system, one criterion has been added to the measure of the quality of the academy: whether it can prepare students for the imperial examinations. For example, in the late Tang dynasty, the schools that were run by the imperial court, compared to private schools, gradually fell out of popularity because their curriculum could not fully cover the revised content of the imperial

examinations [1]. This led to the establishment of schools in many later dynasties almost exclusively to prepare students for the imperial examinations. For example, during the Ming and Qing dynasties, students were mandatorily required to enter schools operated by the imperial court to prepare for the imperial examinations. Thus, it can be seen that the imperial examination system shaped education at that time into an exam-oriented education. Moreover, although the imperial examinations were officially abolished in 1905 in the late Qing Dynasty, this kind of exam-oriented education has continued to this day in contemporary China.

Thus, it can be seen that, in ancient Chinese society, the emergence of the imperial examination system was a major social change that had a great impact on education, especially the academic curriculum. The emergence of the imperial examination made scholars from ordinary families can also take the examination for the chance to become an official. Therefore the general population attached great importance to the imperial examination, and it was valued as never before. At that time, school curricula and the purpose of education were also forced to change due to the status quo of all scholars preparing for the imperial examinations.

2.2. Chinese Education in the 20th Century

After the establishment of the PRC by the Communist Party of China (hereinafter CPC) in 1949, China developed very rapidly in all aspects, and in education, it also started anew and went through many reforms. From 1949 to 2000, the Chinese government aimed to set up a whole new national education system and in the context of the core purpose of education, the government tried to make a balance between political status and academic competencies. First of all, in the initial years after 1949, everything had to start from the fundamentals, the establishment of a national-controlled education system, the consolidation and strengthening of the power of the CPC and the unification of the official language were the top priorities at that time. This included several actions such as nationalizing all the existing educational institutions, constructing new schools and educational institutions, and introducing a policy to popularise Putonghua, also known as the common language [2].

By 1965, since Chinese education has been growing and has a certain foundation, both knowledge and correct political orientation are considered important. Nationalized education was still the only component of Chinese education, so schools still emphasized a correct political orientation, but different kinds of schools were built and categorized to train students separately. For example, there was a dual educational system at that time, consisting of "regular schools" to prepare students for academic competencies for higher education and "work-study schools" that aimed at providing basic education to students from the bottom of the class [2].

After that, by 1978, Deng Xiaoping introduced the policy of reform and opening up which led to substantial economic development and modernization, which can be seen that the demand for talent is also greater than ever. As a result, since 1978, the educational system has consistently aimed at cultivating a diverse range of qualified workers for the rapidly growing economy [2]. This also led to a virtuous cycle: the schools brought a lot of skilled intellectuals, which led to economic growth, and hence the certain growth provided sufficient economic conditions for the expansion and development of the education system.

To sum up, after the establishment of the PRC, the society gradually changed from a state of turmoil to stability and then began to develop rapidly. During this process, education has also responded to these changes in society. At the beginning of the country, the education system had just been established and the most important thing for education was to maintain national unity, thus a series of measures are centered on this purpose. Then, as society stabilized, the education system gradually branched out into different branches to train students in different situations. Finally, at a stage when society is developing rapidly, the purpose of education also shifted to mainly talent cultivation and churned out a large number of talents for society.

2.3. Current Education in 21st Century China

Then, as the time has come to the 21st century, some new issues have arisen as the education system for the training of human resources has been gradually improved. The brunt of this is the critique of exam-oriented education. Therefore, until now, the Chinese government has been trying to reverse the present situation in which education in China has been mainly aimed at meeting examinations. Such as the implementation of quality (suzhi) education and the "double reduction" policy.

Firstly, Quality education in China refers to not merely the academic aspect, but the education for the comprehensive development of a person including professional knowledge, morality, physical health, and so on. Actually, before the 21st century, the idea of quality education has already risen. However, it is in the 21st century that quality education has been formally and fully implemented. In 1999, quality education was included as an independent element in the "Action Plan for Invigorating Education in the 21st Century", which included the advancement of early childhood education, SEN education, and moral, physical, and art education [3].

Secondly, nowadays the competition in the high school entrance exam and the college entrance exam is getting more and more intense. This puts students under increasing pressure, as they not only have to complete the learning tasks assigned by their schoolteachers in school but also have to attend a lot of extra-curricular tutorials. In China, the phenomenon of taking extracurricular tutorials is very common. To deal with the increasing burden on students, parents, and schools, in 2021, The General Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the General Office of the State Council issued a document called "Opinions on Further Reducing the Burden of Homework on Students in Compulsory Education and the Burden of After-School Training" (hereinafter referred to as double reduction) and asked for putting into practice. This included reducing the excessive burden of homework on students, enhancing teaching quality in schools, strictly governing the extracurricular training phenomenon, and so on [4].

In conclusion, one main characteristic of Chinese current society is the whole country suffers from the enormous pressure of exam-oriented education. Examinations have become the only criterion for measuring students, students have to compete fiercely for further studies, and parents are under immense pressure because they have to bear both in-school tuition fees and extra-curricular tutorial classes. Therefore, the government has introduced quality education and the double reduction policy to change this social situation. Thus, it can be seen that education is also a factor that can affect social change.

3. Relationship between Education and Social Change

In this section, through analyzing the brief development of education in China as mentioned above, there are two types of relationships that can be drawn between education and social change.

3.1. Social Change Boosts Development in Education

Firstly, the change in society can certainly lead to the establishment and reform of education. For example, in ancient China, the culture of attaching great importance to the imperial examination system prevailed throughout the society. This resulted in the reform of the school curriculum to prepare students for imperial exams. And, during the period of reform and opening up, when China changed from a planned economy to a mixed economy and society, this social change led to the pursuit of talent. Thus, schools at that time began to focus on the teaching of professional knowledge and the cultivation of talents. Moreover, in contemporary China, the general educational pressures faced by parents of students are quite great, so the education system now has to be reformed to ease the burden on students.

3.2. Facilitate the Move towards an Ideal Society

Moreover, social change can be seen as both an influencer and an object of influence. Education can also be seen both as an affected body and as a tool to be used to change society. Thus, it can be seen that the second relationship is not a direct relationship between education and social change. There is a medium that connects education and social change. This brings up a question that is: who will use education as a tool? In other words, who found the power of education?

The power of education can be concluded as shaping people's behaviors. Educating a person involves two components: educators imparting knowledge and students gaining knowledge. Through this process, education has a transforming force that cultivates a first consciousness that translates into inner awareness and allows for deep change in individuals [5]. In the context of China, from time immemorial, it has always been the State that took control of education and used education as a tool to shape humans into citizens. And society is made up of people, so the molding of people leads to changes in society. Thus, it can be seen that education is a vehicle used by states to achieve the ideal society they have in mind through indoctrinating students' specified knowledge and thus changing their behavior patterns.

For instance, as mentioned above, the State's requirements for the acquisition of professional knowledge have become higher and higher with the gradual development of the education system. In other words, the definition of what constitutes an ideal society will change over time, just like as the society develops, the government gradually has higher standards of the ideal society and begins to need more and more educated people to run it. Therefore education is developing more and more, to cultivate talents more comprehensively.

But unlike this, it is worth noting that no matter whether Chinese education is in the period of its recent establishment or has become relatively mature, the political and ideological function of education has never slackened and has always been attached to great importance. This is because, in China, an ideal society has always been that everyone with a unified political orientation. Apart from that, take the above-mentioned quality education as an example, as Dello-Iacovo mentioned, the goal of producing these "high quality" individuals is to suit national demands rather than their achievement [3]. In other words, the criteria for the attainment of a quality human being are determined by the State. The reason why the State has embarked on quality education is that an all-rounded person is more in line with the requirements of an ideal society than a person who only possesses specialized knowledge.

However, the relationship between education, state, and social change discussed above is considered only in the context of China. There will be a critique that this relationship only exists in countries that attach importance to nationalism and where the government is in charge of the whole education system. In other words, the validity of this relationship varies between countries. However, although not every country is like China, leaving aside the subjective or not subjective nature of the endorsement of this relationship, according to Dewey, there is a fact that a lot of indoctrination is currently taking place in schools, particularly to the prevailing economic system and nationalism [6]. In other words, while in other countries the education system may not be under the full control of the government, or there may be some countries that do not place special emphasis on the teaching of patriotism, this centralized shaping of the people through education to achieve an ideal society exists to a greater or lesser extent. Nevertheless, there is no denying that this is an issue that deserves more consideration. For future scholars, this topic is well worth more research.

4. Vision for the Future of Education

Based on the mutual impact between society and education, it is necessary to implement policies that give priority to the development of education to promote the overall development of the country. In addition, the development of education should be considered in the context of the current situation of society, starting with the main issues. Based on the context of contemporary society, the most important issue at present is regional educational inequality. The problem of educational equity limits

the development of education to a certain extent and further hinders the overall development of society. Therefore, this is an issue that the future of Chinese education needs to begin to address.

The current state of educational inequality in China is obvious and impossible to ignore. Numerous scholars have found that there is inequality exists in the Chinese education system. A large factor contributing to inequality in education is geography disparities. For instance, it is found that the expansion of higher education enrolment did not reduce the disparities impacted by household registration, family financial status, and the level of education of parents [7]. Also, through analyzing the IREA (Index of Regional Education Advantage), they concluded that despite the Government's growing contribution to the advancement of education and the reduction of educational disparities, there are still substantial geographic variations in educational attainment, and the spatial distribution of these differences has not significantly changed [8].

To deal with the educational inequality caused by geographical disparities, it is argued that promoting online distance education through policies enacted by the national government is an effective solution. Distance education is not a brand-new topic in China. During the period of Covid, distance education took over the responsibility of offline education which had been paralysed and sustained the education of the time. Nevertheless, distance education has already been promoted by the national government since long before the period of COVID-19. In 2019, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China published "Guiding Opinions on Promoting the Healthy Development of Online Education", inside the guideline, it is mentioned that distance education aims to ensure everyone can learn everywhere at any time [9]. In other words, the function of distance education is not just as a replacement for offline education during the pandemic, but also to help solve issues that offline education cannot, such as the wide disparity of educational resources in different regions. In the context of the relationship between education and social development mentioned above, it can be concluded that through the strong support of national governments for distance education, the education inequality caused by regional disparity can be mitigated and led to a move towards a better society.

However, some scholars suggested that according to the study of distance education in the period of COVID-19, it is found that the teaching quality of distance education is limited. According to research, during the distance-learning classes, the educators continued to use conventional teaching methods, thus, distance learning was less successful than in traditional classroom settings because of insufficient interaction and communication [10]. Thus the quality of online education still needs to be further improved, but this does not detract from the fact that online education is a strategy to alleviate regional inequalities in education. Therefore, for the Chinese government, support to improve both the access and quality of distance education is important.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, education in China developed dramatically with the twists and turns of social change, and there is a certain relationship found between these two elements. Social change can certainly lead to the change in education. Education is a strategy used by the central state to promote social change to achieve an ideal status. Thus, it is suggested that in China, the educational inequality caused by regional disparities can be alleviated through the government's support of distance education.

In this article, firstly, the development of education in China is briefly discussed. Since the history of China is quite long, Therefore, there is only a brief discussion about education in ancient China during the period of the imperial examination system, the development of education in modern China at several important points in time, and some education policies in contemporary China. Secondly, through analyzing the development of education mentioned above, it is found that there is a mutual impact relationship between education and social change. Social change can directly impact the development of education. While education can also impact social change, with the medium of government control. However, there is also concern that this relationship exists because of some of the unique characteristics of China as a country such as the fact that education is solely in the hands

of the government, or the importance placed on nationalism education, etc. This paper suggested that such relationships can exist in different countries, but that the strength of the relationship varies according to the ruling system of the different countries. Thirdly, one contemporary issue of education in China is identified as regional education inequality. This paper suggested that through the promotion of distance education, the regional inequality phenomenon in education can be mitigated. However, there is some feedback about the limited teaching quality of online education. Although this does not mean distance education cannot improve regional educational equality, improving the quality of distance education is the important as the promotion of distance education. Apart from that, there are two suggestions for future research. Firstly, it is important to explore whether the relationship between education, social change, and the central government also works in other countries. Secondly, improving the teaching quality of distance education is also a worthwhile topic for future scholars.

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