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Book Review

*Human Rights Education in China:
Perspectives, Policies and Practices*

By Weihong Liang

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Since the end of the Cold War in the early 1990s, human rights education (HRE) has proliferated at the global level for three decades, especially through its promotion at the United Nations. Though there is broad agreement that HRE aims to build a universal culture of respect for and protection of human rights, as manifested by the definition proposed by the United Nations (OHCHR, 1999), the practice of HRE varies across countries based on particular political, social, cultural, and economic contexts. Through tracing ideological orientations and the historical development of human rights and HRE in China, analyzing China's HRE policies, and presenting a Chinese secondary school's practice of HRE, Dr. Weihong Liang's

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book *Human Rights Education in China: Perspectives, Policies and Practices* greatly enriches our understanding of the implementation and tensions of HRE in a non-Western and less democratic society. This book contributes to the field of human rights and HRE by detailing how China modified the global discourse of human rights and HRE based on its historical and cultural traditions and political conditions. It also vividly documents how different actors (school, teachers, and students) implemented and interpreted HRE, portraying a complex picture with the tensions of HRE in China.

In Chapter 2, the book first systematically reviews the theories and issues of human rights and HRE, showing the complexity of human rights and HRE in general and setting a foundation to explore human rights and HRE in China. After examining two theoretical debates in the field of human rights, i.e., whether human rights are innate or socially constructed and whether human rights are universal or culturally relative, the author adopts a culturally relative and socially constructive framework to investigate Chinese discourses of human rights. In addition, the author extensively reviews policies, models, and implementations of HRE, highlighting that HRE is about not only promoting students' knowledge, values, and skills of applying human rights through schooling, but also about training professional groups, vulnerable groups, and the public at large to prevent the violation of human rights.

Chapter 3 thoroughly situates four main ideological orientations of HRE in Chinese discourses of human rights: Confucianism, liberalism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism. Impressively, this chapter explores how the Confucian idea of human nature and the relationship between individual and community indicates a different understanding of human rights between China and the West. Though Confucianism believes human beings are naturally equal (similar to the West), its emphasis on the pursuit of the common good and collective interests (such as the polity's stability and prosperity) distinguishes itself from the Western prioritization of individual rights over collective interests.

This chapter also shows that China's more than a century history of nation-building and rebuilding (1860 to present) plays an important role in

shaping the liberal and nationalist discourses of human rights in China. To make a strong Chinese nation, Chinese liberal intellectuals in the late Qing Dynasty (1860 to 1911) selectively absorbed Western ideas of human rights for individual empowerment and for the survival of the nation. In contrast, nationalists in the Republic of China (ROC) (1912–1949) and People’s Republic of China (PRC) (1949–present) perceived that individual freedom and rights were means for national strengthening, as granted by the Constitution, and could be limited to safeguard public order or to protect collective interests. Moreover, this chapter reveals that Chinese cosmopolitanism also involves elements of human rights, as it emphasizes equality, individuals’ dignity and happiness, addressing the common good in human society. As a result, Chapter 3 clearly illustrates for readers how China’s human rights discourses are embedded in its cultural traditions and history, supporting the constructive and culturally relative perspective of human rights.

Chapter 4 highlights the nation-state’s role in defining human rights for citizenship making and nation building. In particular, this chapter introduces the development of human rights in the PRC, evolving from a class-based enjoyment of human rights in the Mao era (1949 to 1976) to prioritizing the development of citizens’ social economic rights in the post-Mao era (1976 to present). It shows Chinese leaders after Mao preferred to emphasize the rights to subsistence and development over civil and political rights with a concern of ensuring stable social contexts for political and economic reform, making China’s current human rights promotion different from that of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in terms of rights sequences. Importantly, Liang argues that the internal conflicts between democracy and one-party rule and between promoting human rights and suppressing free expression and association will lead to tensions in the implementation of HRE in schooling. These issues are further addressed in Chapter 7 and Chapter 8.

Chapter 5 turns the focus to HRE, examining HRE-related curriculum in China’s modern history. It shows that the education of rights and citizenship in China has always served social and political functions, dedicating itself to cultivate modern citizenry that benefits China’s nation building, no

matter in the ROC or PRC. This chapter also informs readers about China's progress of HRE at the policy level in the past two decades. It is surprising to see that since the 2000s, along with China's deep integration into the world economy and the influence of globalization, the state has passed a series of national human rights action plans (2009, 2012, 2016) and has explicitly promoted HRE in public training and school education with the aim to increase people's human rights knowledge and awareness.

While China's policies of HRE seem to be ambitious, it is unclear how HRE is implemented in schooling according to previous studies. Through a qualitative study in a public junior high school that integrated HRE, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 illuminate what HRE looks like in reality. Chapter 6 shows that the focal school indirectly promoted HRE by making the school management democratic, teaching human rights content in related subjects (such as moral education, citizenship education, history, and legal-related studies), conducting extra-curricular activities, and providing a safe, engaged, and supportive school culture. However, the school was also constrained to some extent as it had to implement a censorship project required by the local government. Chapter 7 documents teachers' various responses to HRE, ranging from following the state's discourse of human rights, to adapting HRE policies by shifting the emphasis on students' engagement and critical thinking, and to avoiding politically sensitive topics.

Chapter 8 presents the students' perceptions of human rights and HRE and their evaluations of HRE-related courses and the school's human rights climate. In general, students showed a liberal and individualistic understanding of human rights, strongly agreeing that individuals should enjoy natural and equal rights. Yet, some students agreed with the state's interpretations of human rights, thinking that the right to subsistence is important and that exercising individual rights should not infringe upon the state's interests. In terms of HRE, students reported positive experiences of HRE-related courses and school climate, such as learning human rights principles, freely expressing their ideas in the classroom, and developing critical thinking skills. However, this study noticed that students' civic participation was functional for students' development of personality, sense of belonging to the

community, and skills for participation in school/community affairs. The participation was heavily regulated by school administrators and the state.

In the Conclusion, Dr. Liang proposes the concept of “embedded HRE” to understand Chinese HRE, pointing out that HRE in China is a socialization project for citizenship making that aims to enhance students’ knowledge and awareness of human rights and to promote Chinese citizenship. This chapter also highlights a major limitation of Chinese HRE caused by China’s political condition. That is, it doesn’t empower individuals and the public to recognize and redress human rights abuses.

A culturally relative understanding of human rights and HRE has been questioned by Ong (1999) and Sen (2006) as it might become an excuse for an authoritarian rule and a denial of basic human rights. As China has always been criticized for its human rights records, it could be debated whether the Chinese government’s interpretation of human rights and implementation of HRE is authentic or merely performative. However, rather than defending China’s stance on human rights, Dr. Liang’s book convincingly shows us that a culturally relative and socially constructive perspective remains a powerful tool to reveal the complexity of human rights and HRE in China. It is undeniable that China’s current situation of human rights and HRE is shaped by its political conditions; nevertheless, culture and history play an important role to influence the state and people’s interpretations and implementation of human rights and HRE. This book reminds Chinese scholars to be aware of the limitations of a culturally relative understanding of human rights and HRE; it also contributes to international scholarship by highlighting that culture and history do matter for understanding the implementation of human rights and HRE.

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