

Non-Conventional Higher Education and the Construction of a Learning Society

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At the invitation of the organizing committee, I'd like to give a presentation on my thinking about the topic "the non-conventional education and the construction of learning society". And I want to have a look at what kind of enlightenment we can get from the perspective of the historical development of the non-conventional higher education.

It is said that history is a mirror. We are glad to see that the chairman of the ICDE is an expert in the area of history research (historian) . I think his research on history must be very profound. So today I take this opportunity to talk about the history of China's non-conventional education and try to find something from it. My report can be divided into three parts. It will start with the future, trying to find what kind of demands do we need for nowadays and the future. After that we will retrospect the road we have walked on by means of these demands. And lastly, we will see what we can conclude.

First, let's have a review of the concept of "learning society". It was first advanced by Mr Hutchins (Robert M. Hutchins) in 1968. In 1971, the UNESCO gave a description about the three concepts "lifelong educational, lifelong learning and learning society" in the book *Learning to be* and systematized this theory in *the Faure report*. And it was promoted through the UNESCO. In the next 30 years since then, the issue of lifelong education and lifelong learning has gradually become a dominant educational thought in the world. After that, its theoretical research and practical exploration were successively conducted all over the world. After entering the 1990s, the conception of learning society has been transformed into concrete action plans and strategies in developed countries, and has been also gradually turned into the exploration and implementation phase of policy making and legalization.

Next, let's have a look at the description of learning society. The concept of learning society was described differently by scholars home and abroad. For example, the international scholars and organizations like Mr. Hutchins (1968), the UNESCO (1972), the Carnegie Foundation (1973), Peterson (1983) and Ranson (1998) have defined learning society. For instance, Mr Hutchins (1968:133) suggested that the learning society would be "one that, in addition to offering part-time adult education to every man and woman at every phase of grown-up life, had succeeded in transforming its values in such a way that learning, fulfillment, becoming human, had become its aims and all its institutions were directed to this end." The Carnegie Commission on Higher Education defined the learning society as a society in which individual learns at home, schools, society, working place, and other educational training institutions. Many scholars in China like HU Mengjing (1991), HUANG Shunfu (1998), LI Yixian (2000), MENG Fanhua (2003) and ZHOU Hongyu (2005) have also described learning society. For instance, LI Yixian (2000)said that, "A

learning society refers to the one that is centered upon learners to satisfy the learning needs of all the members of the society based on the system of lifelong learning, lifelong education and learning organizations, and further to obtain sustainable social development on its own.”

If we analyze the definition of learning society, we can find that although the starting point of each scholar’s description is different, the four elements of the learning society were all concerned. The first one is the learners of learning society in which learning has become the basic qualification of people’s survival and development. The second element is the learning organization, and the school is not the only learning organization any more while various institutions and organizations in society can all provide learning opportunities. The third element is learning systems and there should be an open and interactive learning system in learning society, including learning evaluation and accreditation system and approbating system of learning outcomes in different learning organizations. The fourth one is the learning platforms, which can realize the communication of information and knowledge in order to provide relevant learning conditions for learners.

If we re-analyze these expressions of scholars, we can also find that the learning society in people’s ideals has four characteristics. The first one is independence, which emphasize that the value of self-learning, especially the self-learning with others’ help, should be fully fulfilled in the learning society. The next one is openness, which means that there should be abundant learning recourse, diverse learning content and flexible means of resources organizing. The third one is the equality. In other words, every social member should be offered full learning opportunities to achieve their learning demand. The last one is the convenience. In learning society people have a quick, convenient and flexible access to information and knowledge to achieve an effective link between the learners and learning organizations.

According to the understanding of the learning society, every country has chosen different paths to push forward the construction of learning society. For example, the Unites States gradually stepped into the lifelong learning society beginning from the community college and various adult education. We have friends here from Sweden, and the path towards a lifelong learning society that Sweden has chosen may largely start from developed adult education and recurrent education. We also have the president of Japan Open University here. As is known to us, the Osaka city in Japan achieved the goal of building a learning city by giving full play to its history and culture. Take Taiwan for another example, it promotes the construction of learning society by establishing a community lifelong learning system. As in the mainland of China, which path we will choose and should choose? Let’s attempt to find a number of issues from a historical perspective.

In the following part, let’s review the development of non-conventional education in China. The so-called non-conventional higher education is a term compared to full-time general higher education. But it is based on the diploma education as its main content. It also includes non-diploma education. After the founding of New China in nearly 60 years, China has developed a variety of

forms of non-conventional higher education. So far there are still 10 forms of non-conventional higher education. They are respectively evening college, Correspondence Education, radio and television education, adults full-time schooling, self-study higher education examination, the second bachelor's degree, equivalent diploma, professional degrees, open education and web-based education.

The development of these ten forms of non-conventional higher education can be generally divided into three phases. The first one is the initial exploration phase, from 1950 to 1978, marked by the exploration of openness to target learners. In this phase, the conventional higher education achieved its preliminary transformation from in-campus to out-campus. The second phase is the multi-way exploration phase, from 1979 to 1998, in which China has successively produced six forms of non-conventional education. So it can be called a phase with its emphasis on the exploration of openness to educational forms. The third phase is the distance open education phase, from 1999 to present. In addition to maintain the exploration of openness to target learners and educational forms, the exploration in this phase gives more emphasis on the openness to educational resource, methods and environment.

In order for us to have a more in-depth understanding, I'd like to discuss this ten non-conventional higher education forms in detail.

The first two kinds are evening college and correspondent education, which were born in the early years of new China when the conventional education was very weak. Large-scale economic construction urgently needed a large number of talented people. In that case, the evening college was initiated in Renmin University of China in 1950. Besides, the correspondent education was also initiated in this university in 1953. What is described in the following chart is the registered students' scale of evening colleges and correspondent education from 1999 to 2007. In 2007, the number of registered student of correspondent education, colored in green, is 2,580,000 and that of the evening colleges, colored in blue, is 1,360,000.

(Unit: ten thousand)

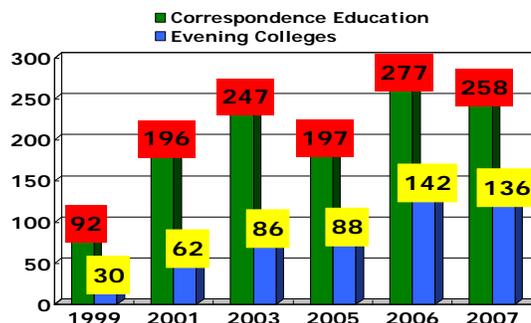


Chart1: The registered students' scale of evening colleges and correspondent education.

The third kind of non-conventional education is radio and television education, which mainly utilizes the radio, television, printed and audiovisual

materials to carry out long distance teaching. This period was mainly from 1979 to 1998. Chart 2 shows the changes of the registered students' scale, happened in 20 years from the foundation of China Radio and Television University to 1998. The black line shows the number of the campus students of adult education enrolled by radio and television universities. The green line shows the number of campus students of general education of radio and television universities. Therefore, China's Radio and Television universities also carried a small amount of traditional education from 1986 to 1998, or even more lately to 2006.

(Unit: ten thousand)

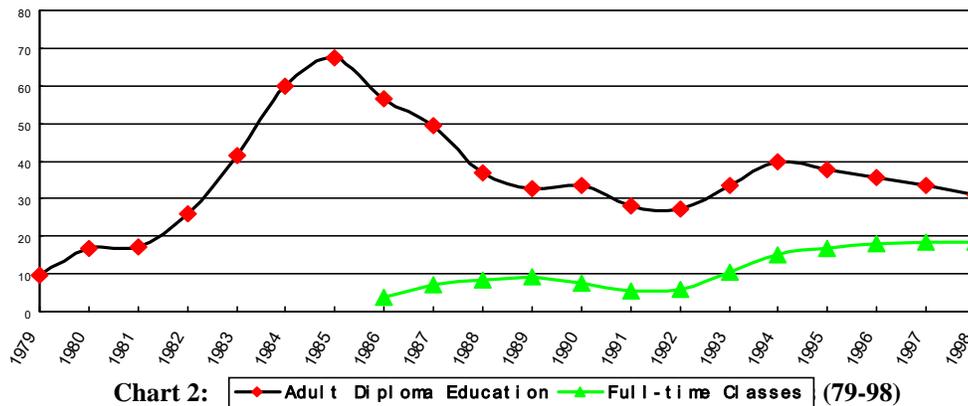


Chart 2: Adult Diploma Education Full-time Classes (79-98)

The fourth one, adults full-time schooling, was initiated in August 1980 based on the urgent needs for a large number of talented people in economic construction after the Cultural Revolution and for the purpose of training the great majority of cadres. That's the reason why its former name was called the special training courses for cadres. Chart 3 shows that the adults full-time schooling still has 670,000 students till 2007.

(Unit: ten thousand)

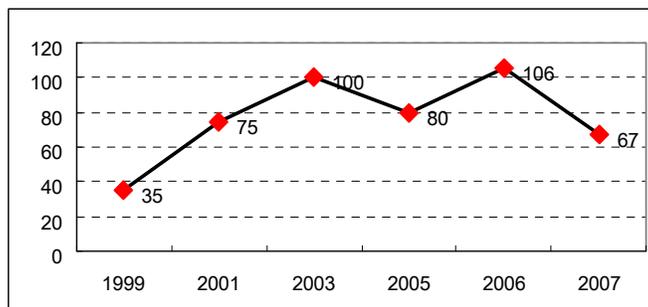


Chart 3: Number of registered students of adults full-time schooling (1999-2007)

The fifth kind of non-conventional higher education is the self-study higher education examination that is a unique and creative educational form of China.

Precisely speaking, it should be called an examination form, and was initiated in Beijing, Tianjing, Shanghai and Liaoning province between 1981 and 1982. It began to extend to the nation wide after 1983. The basic characteristic of this form is that any of the social members can get the knowledge by his self-learning. If the social member can not learn well by himself, he can get help from various types of social organizations. If he reaches a certain level and passes the national organized examinations, his learning outcome will be recognized by the nation. Hence, this educational form has only three links: self-study, social help study and national examine. This system was initiated based on the encouraging all social members to learn and to be a talented person by his endeavor. By 2007, there are progressive total 4, 8,700,000 persons participating in the self-examination and 8,450,000 persons get the diploma of associate degree or above. However, the number of attending this kind of learning has begun to decline in the recent years. The number in the year 2000 was a peak with 14,000,000 attendances and gradually declined after that with a number of 9,500,000 in 2006.

(Unit: ten thousand)

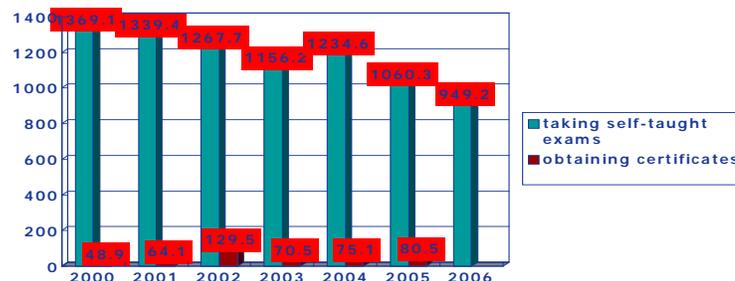


Chart 4: Person-times of taking self-taught exams and number of students who have obtained certificates

The second bachelor's degree system is the sixth kind of non-conventional higher education. In the early 1980s, after graduating from college, many people cannot use what they have learned at their work. In order to let these people be able to better serve the needs of working, our country established this kind of system. This system started in 1984 for the purpose of training some interdisciplinary advanced specialized talents with wide range of

knowledge. By 2007, there are 73 programs and 375 professional sites of the second bachelor's degree opened in colleges and universities.

The seventh and eighth are equivalent diploma and professional degrees systems. The system of in service personnel's applying for equivalent master degree and PhD began in 1986. This learning system requires learners to have a background of abundant working practices. Based on this, they can attend the postgraduate classes and can also obtain the courses accreditation by participating the self-study examinations of the schools. After that, if learners pass the foreign language examinations and integrative tests organized by the country and take part in the paper defense of general colleges and universities, they can acquire the corresponding master degree or PhD.

Professional degree education, started in 1990, is another degree system different from disciplinary education. It faces to those who have rich professional experience and mainly aims at cultivating the high-level applied talents not the discipline research talents. There are two types of Professional degree systems in China, professional master and professional doctor. The former one includes business administration, education, translation, international Chinese education, law, accounting, public management, engineering, architecture, landscape architecture, agricultural extension, public health, veterinarian, clinical medicine, stomatology, pharmacy, physical education, art and military, etc. The latter one includes clinical medicine, stomatology, veterinarian and so on. By 2007, the number of enrolled in-service staffs to apply for master's or doctor's degree and professional degree education is 3,460,000, with 7357doctors and 338711masters.

The ninth kind is the open education. The open education is an educational form organized and implemented by China radio and television education system. It operated integratively by utilizing the network with the coverage of the urban and rural areas across the country and implemented the management of registration entrance, flexible learning system and credit system. Its main feature is to integrate the high-quality educational resources of the society including the general colleges and universities and then open to the learners. The following chart shows the number of registered students in the open education in China since 1999. It keeps a development trend of sustainable growth.

(Unit:ten thousand)

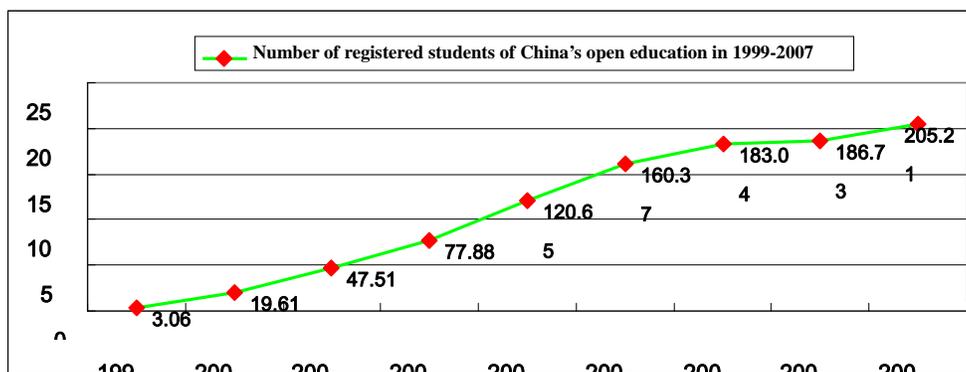


Chart5: Number of registered students of China’s open education in 1999-2007

Web-based education also began in 1999. The difference between web-based education and open education is that colleges and universities can use their own educational resources to open to the community. By 2007, altogether 67 universities have opened the web-based education. As of last year, it has around 1,000,000 enrolled students.

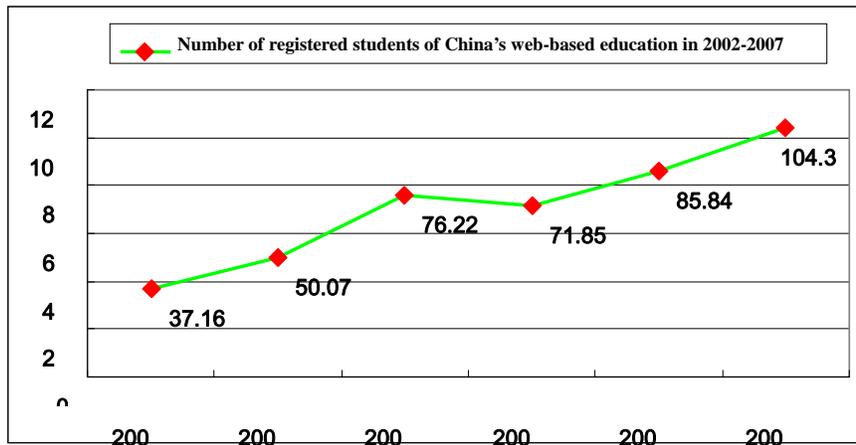


Chart 6: Number of registered students of China’s web-based education in 2002-2007

The following chart describes ten forms of non-conventional higher education. It is clearly shown that the development of non-conventional higher education in China can be divided into three phases, the initial exploration phase (from 1950 to 1978), the multi-way exploration phase (from 1979 to 1998), and the distance open education phase (since 1999).

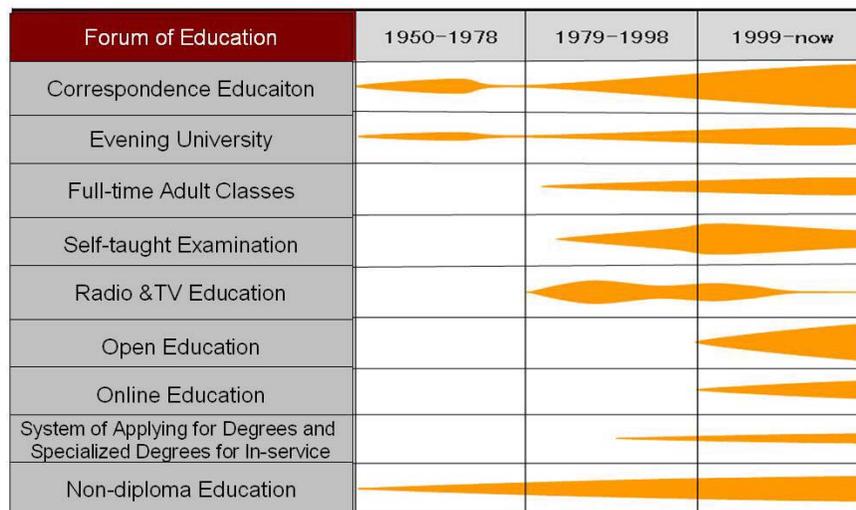


Chart 7: Form of Education

These ten non-conventional higher education forms are different in their historical background of generating, and have their own characteristics in the development processes. Besides, their target learners are also different. However, they have four common elements: abundant and various high quality educational resources; effectively operated school-running networks; good quality supporting service; standardized management and quality assurance measures.

Study their history of development, we can find that they have four common characteristics in the development demands or directions. Orienting to the vulnerable groups and offering educational services; Meeting the learning needs of in-service staffs as their endeavor direction; Promoting the openness, convenience, and flexibility of educational activities as their direction; Advancing the wide utilization of high quality educational resources. Therefore, these ten non-conventional higher education forms have their own characteristics but also have something in common.

If we compare the four elements and four characteristics of the non-conventional higher education with those of the learning society, what will we find.

The comparison between learning society and non-conventional higher education

	Learning Society	Non-conventional Higher Education
Development characteristics	1.independence; 2.openness; 3.equality; 4.convenience;	1. Orienting to the vulnerable groups and offering educational services; 2. Meeting the learning needs of in-service staffs; 3. Promoting the openness, convenience, and flexibility of educational activities; 4. Advancing the wide utilization of high quality educational resources
Development elements	1.learners; 2.learning organization; 3.open and interactive learning system; 4.well developed transmission platform of information and knowledge;	1.Abundant and various high quality educational resources 2. Effectively operated school-running networks; 3. Good quality supporting service; 4. Standardized management and quality assurance measures

Based on the analysis of this table, it is not difficult for us to find that the developmental demands between learning society and non-conventional higher education have much in common and also have some differences between them. Their sameness mainly contains two aspects. Firstly, the targets of a learning society and non-conventional higher education are the same in constructing the system of lifelong education. In other words, in people's ideality, the construction of learning society needs to be supported by lifelong education system while the lifelong education system is the very goal chased by non-conventional higher education. Secondly, the construction of learning society emphasizes on the diversified learning ways and means, various technical means, especially the utilization of information technology, which is also consistent with the multi-way exploration of non-conventional

higher education. That is to say, in people's ideality, the learning ways and means in learning society are various and unrestricted. Over 50 years development process of non-conventional higher education exactly proves that it is consistently pursuing a variety of possible educational forms. Therefore, they are consistent on this point.

However, they also have differences, which contain two aspects. Firstly, learning society is required to meet various learning demands of all social members while the non-conventional higher education gives more emphasis to the needs of social members in diploma education. The former one is the extensive and universal educational demands and the latter one is the demands for diploma education. They are different. Secondly, the learning society requires the wide participation of various social organizations while the non-conventional emphasizes on the dominant role of educational institutions. Hence, in the discussion of learning society, these various institutions usually think more about the question how our resources can be used by learners. But the question how to fully integrate the social resources is concerned in the construction of learning society. These are the differences between them. If the analysis to the similarities and differences are correct, we can draw four conclusions from it.

1. After almost 60 years development and accumulation, China's non-conventional higher education has become valuable resources and important basis of construction of a learning society.

2. According to the development courses of non-conventional higher education, the construction of a learning society should focus on the use of ICT in order to promote integration and sharing of learning resources, establishment of learning environment and exploration of learning methods.

3. In the next step for the development of education, developing the distance education and continuing education should be treated as a significant way of constructing the learning society.

4. It is clear that the development of non-conventional higher education has many gaps and challenges when facing the requirement of constructing the learning society. In order to play a more important role in the learning society, the non-conventional higher education should accelerate its structural adaptation, including content reformation, resources integration and environmental construction.

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