

New Geography Curriculum Reform of Middle Schools in China

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Abstract

China began new curriculum reforms in 2000. The reform changed the focus of geography from its traditional subject centered curriculum to permit the adoption of an integrated curriculum. The changes also emphasize elementary innovative spirits, practical capability, scientific and cultural accomplishment, and environmental awareness. Basic knowledge, skills, and methods suitable for lifelong learning are the general goals of the reform in middle schools and have influenced Chinese education deeply. The purpose of this paper is to report on three facets of the reform movement: 1) how it affected the curriculum in general; 2) the plan for implementation; and 3) the influences on textbooks.

Key Words: Geography, Curricula reform, Middle schools, China.

Background to the Geography Education Reform

China began new curriculum reform in 2000. The reform movement in geographic education had three major goals. The first was to adjust the national curriculum policy for geography. This had the effect of moving school curricula policy from the national government to the local and school levels. The intent is to promote the capacity to develop curricula in a way that meets local and subsequently national needs. The second was to change the curriculum selection options to either a content or integrated design. Following the reform, the design is chosen freely at the local and school levels. The first six grades of geography is taught in the elementary schools and is generally integrated with history, language, and society studies. The reform gives the local schools the jurisdiction to select either disciplinary or integrated beginning in grades 7 and 8 of the junior middle school. The third change

in the reform is a major departure for past educational policies. Students may now undertake cooperative learning and research of problems and issues of local concern. There is a greater practical application of learning through the use of technology. An indirect outcome of student research on projects is to increase the use of modern technology in geographic education.

General Impacts of the Geography Education Reform

The general impact of the curriculum reform is to develop the scientific concepts of population, resource, environment, and sustainable development. Because of its dual role in physical science and social science, geography content includes a wide range of topics and theories. The broad scientific scope of geography requires that geographic education follow curriculum principles that attend to the diversity of the discipline.

The new demands of the reform complement the mission of geographic education in high schools. In those grades the goals of sustainable development, population, natural resources, environment, and regional development are built upon from the Geography Curriculum Standard for Middle Schools.

Prior to the reforms, the curriculum for geography in the junior middle schools (grades 7–9) consisted of regional geography. It was mainly a descriptive study with little of the analysis that is necessary for students to be able to compare and contrast the qualities of regions. The lack of a scientific and analytical approach to geography was viewed as a curricular shortcoming. Junior middle school students were not being adequately prepared for geographic education in the high school.

The high school geography curriculum has a rigorous content design using systematic topics. It is comprised of required and elective courses. Required courses consist of three modules, Geography One, Geography Two, and Geography Three (2 credits, 36 class hour each). Module One is the introduction to modern geography. Module Two is the study of the scientific aspects of human-environment relationships, including sustainable use of the environment. Module Three is devoted to the ways that people develop and use transportation, energy, and water.

Elective courses for high schools are comprised of seven modules. They are Universe and Earth, Ocean Geography, Protection and Cure of Natural Disasters, Application of Geography Information Technology, Planning of Urban and Rural Areas, Tourism Geography, and Environmental Protection (2 credits, 36 class hours apiece). Elective modules include facets

of theory, application, and technology. These electives are beneficial to widening the students' perspective and improving their scientific spirit and humane capacities.

The order of the elective courses is not set and they can be taken before or after the required courses, or they can also be taken simultaneously. Students generally enroll for one to three of the elective modules.

Implementing the Reform in Middle School Geography Education

In 2001 and 2003 the reform focused on the preparation of criteria for model school geography. Two policy statements were prepared. The first was the Geography Curriculum Criterion of Full-Time Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education 2001, 2003). The second was the Geography Curriculum Criterion for Ordinary High Schools (Ministry of Education 2003). These two documents spelled out the changes to the compulsory middle school grades, including geography, and the geography requirements for the non-specialized high schools. China has specialized high schools for scientific and vocational studies in addition to the ordinary high schools. The ordinary high schools greatly outnumber the other types of high schools.

The documents were widely distributed to appropriate local and provincial authorities. The wide ranging reviews provided feedback on the suitability of reform in general. The author was particularly interested in geography education due for his professional work at the Ministry of Education in Beijing.

In July 2001, the Ministry of Education activated field trials for the junior middle schools. The new geography curriculum was field tested first in 38 national experimental areas of 27 provinces and municipalities. Nearly one-half million students began to study the new curriculum in September 2003. Throughout China in the autumn 2002, the experimentation of new curriculum for junior middle schools was expanded into 570 provincial experimental areas nationwide (except for Shanghai and Tibet). Nearly nine million students joined the experiment involving nearly 20% in total students of same grades. In the autumn 2003, 1642 experimental areas with junior middle schools implemented the new curriculum. Thirty-five million students joined in the experimentation and included 47% of the total students in junior middle schools in those areas. The Geography Curriculum Criterion of Full-time Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education 2001, 2003) was amended after the teaching experimentation and field trials of more than

two years and has been further implemented. It was taught to 80-90% of the students in grades 7 and 8 in 2004. It was implemented in all junior middle schools in the autumn 2005.

Implementing Reform in the Ordinary High School

In April 2003, the Ministry of Education enacted the Geography Curriculum Criterion for Ordinary High Schools (Ministry of Education 2003). In September 2005, the field trials began with the newly proposed curriculum. The experimentation was held in four provinces the first year. The intent of the field trials was to determine the suitability of the content and structure the curriculum for high school students in different regions of China. Four provinces participated: Guangdong, Shandong, Ningxia, and Hainan. In 2005, the experimentation was expanded to 10 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions. In 2006, the experimentation will be expanded to 16-20 provinces, municipalities, and autonomous regions. In the autumn of 2007, the new curriculum will be implemented nationwide from the first year of high school. The 2007 implementation will mark the conclusion of the geography reform initiated in 2000. It will have taken seven years, but the impact of the reform will affect China for many years. One of those impacts is on textbooks, the topic of the next section of the paper.

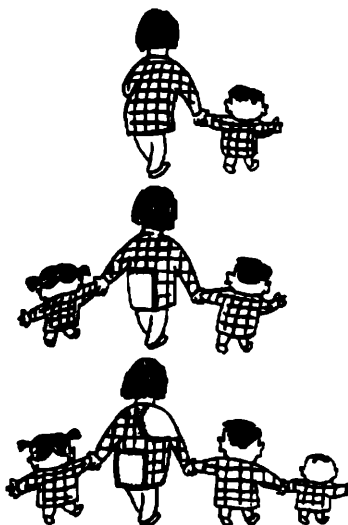
Geography Textbooks and the Reform

The curriculum reform in middle schools that began in China in 2000 has also caused geography textbooks to change. Four series of new geography textbooks for middle schools have been published since the curriculum reform began. The editors-in-chief for the series are: Wang Min for the China Map Press; Wang Jian for the Shandong Press; Zhu Xiang for the Hunan Press; and Fan Jie for the Peoples' Education Press. The book series are designed specifically to meet the content requirements of the curriculum reform combine to represent a new era in textbook publishing in China.

The author of this paper, and one of the textbook series editors-in-chief collected survey data regarding the China Map Press series. The survey results suggested three things. First, the books are more interesting than prior books; second, the books expose students to complete research on topics; and third, the books were responsible for greater enthusiasm for learning geography.

An example of the textbook series from the China Map Press follows. A line drawing of a mother and her children is presented (Figure 1). It is marked with the activity symbol. The activity is usually used to give rise to the topic lesson.

Figure 1. A mother and her children



Students in geography class using the series are then asked the following questions.

1. What does the picture mean?
2. What problems does the picture show?
3. Please discuss with your classmates what kinds of policy should be adopted for our country.

The covers of four of the books from the China Map Press series are shown (Figure 2). They represent, from left to right, books about the natural environment, people, and culture, and regional development (Wangmin 2003, 2004). The covers provide an attractive introduction to the topic of each book.

The book series is designed with focus question for each chapter. Several examples are presented in Table 1.

Assessing student performance in geography education in China occurs in three ways. First the record of grades in the student's classes is an

Figure 2. Books form the China Map Press series.

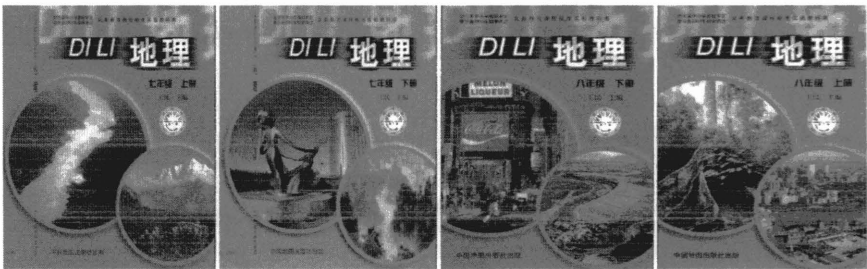


Table 1

Focus Question in Two Module School Books.

Chapters	Topics for discussion
Grade Seven	
Chapter 1	Map and life
Chapter 2	Experience cultural concepts
Chapter 3	Diversity of natural environment
Chapter 4	Resources and people
Chapter 5	Make a tourism plan that is fit for you
Chapter 6	How to analyze the characteristic of a region?
Chapter 7	Learn to compare the differences of regions
Grade Eight	
Chapter 1	Look for the evidence of flux of sea and land
Chapter 2	Develop "climate resources"
Chapter 3	Do the research of language and the names of a place
Chapter 4	Why is regional cooperation necessary?
Chapter 5	Know the continents
Chapter 6	Know the regional organizations
Chapter 7	How to use second-hand materials to know the countries?

important component. Those grades are awarded by teachers for regular coursework. Second, there are performance assessments at the end of the term when students are expected to complete projects and reports that demonstrate proficiencies in geography. These may include the building of models, completion of maps, or the analysis of regional information. The textbook refers to them as study and research. The third evaluation of students occurs with formal examination at the end of the term. Those examinations are set by the local educational authority and are used to assess the knowledge and skills in geography of students. The classroom assessments are where the students' values and attitudes are examined. The overall evaluation employing the three parts is designed to determine if the students have attained the requirements of the curriculum.

Conclusion

The reform in geography education since 2000 has had a major influence on the curriculum in China. Geography education has a clearer and more precise focus on practical questions related to life and local/environmental issues outside of the classroom. Students are interested in studying geography because of the practical application it has to their future. The reformed curriculum engages students in solving problems and applying thinking skills.

There are four conclusions the author can make about the effects of the reform on Geography.

1. The geographic knowledge and skills are more practical and strengthen the students' interest in the subject.
2. Students will have an increased knowledge of international issues.
3. Students will give greater attention to environmental problems, exhibit a stronger environmental ethic, and will be committed to sustainable development.
4. Students, through increased project and research work, will have a greater commitment to self-directed learning.

While it will be some years before the actual effects of the geography education reform are fully known, there is great optimism for possible effects. The reformed curriculum represents a major, positive change in geography education in China.

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Wang Min is a professor of College of Geography, Beijing Normal University and an executive member of Geographical Education Commission of International Geographical Union (2004-2008). He has a strong interest in the geographical education and education for sustainable development. He is also a veteran who has more than 25 years of experience in the field of geography education.