



## Enhancing the Right to Education through Distance Education in China

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### ABSTRACT :

Drawing from the content analysis of distance education, this Paper explores the relationship between the current and past realities in China and increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities. While access, equity and higher educational opportunities remained on paper during the Great Leap and the Great Cultural Revolution when politics took precedence over educational policies, it was in the Post-Mao era that access, equity and higher educational opportunities were addressed to some extent. Although distance education in China has the potential to serve people of all ages, the practice of its imperial examination system makes people unconvinced as to whether distance education in China is capable of enhancing the right to education.

### INTRODUCTION

For a large country with a population of 1.3 billion, one may wonder how China's educational system can educate and train its youth and adults given the fact that there are limited institutions of higher learning in China. Despite the Chinese Government's commitment to education, education for all seemed an unreachable goal for the world's most populous country a decade ago ("Distance Education," 2000). Millions of Chinese people live in remote, mountainous and poverty-stricken areas. Even though there are schools for students to attend, there are no qualified teachers to offer them a proper education. As of 2002, there were only 1396 regular institutions of higher education in China ("Basic Statistics," 2005). One may further question it when thinking about its imperial examination system, which provides opportunities for upward social mobility to children of both peasants and the elite. To the rest of the world, China is known for recognizing ascribed status (Wang, 2006, p. 41). China is also known for being a Confucian nation where education is inextricably bound up with the maintenance of order and continuity in human society (Kaplan, Sobin & Andors, 1979). When education is charged with such a responsibility, one may wonder how education in China can generate a more skilled and flexible work force needed by its four modernizations (e.g., industry, agriculture, science and technology, and national defense).

Amazingly, because China's regular institutions of higher learning cannot accommodate the needs of its students, China has been using distance education as one of its main modes of ensuring the right to education for children and adults. To date, distance education has appeared in eight types of higher education in China:

- Radio/TV universities
- Correspondence departments of regular institutions
- Evening colleges attached to regular institutions
- Workers' colleges
- Independent study examination for higher education
- In-service colleges for administrative staff
- In-service teacher-training colleges
- Peasants' colleges (Yu & Xu, 1988).

Deemed as vital to building the country's educational system for life-long learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, distance education via the internet first caught the Chinese Government's attention in 1994 ("Distance Education," 2000). To provide an internet infrastructure for distance education, the government began to invest in the construction of the China Education and Research Network (CERNET), one of the four national computer networks approved by the State Council ("Distance Education," 2000). By the end of 2000, most provinces and cities in the country had opened high-speed transmission networks to link up with CERNET. Distance education characterized by computer networks and multi-media technologies, has the potential to provide education to all members of society by transcending time and space limitations that have been plaguing conventional education for years. Evidently, China's leaders have sensed that distance education methods suit the situation in China since its teaching resources and school conditions are far from meeting the educational needs of China's youth and adults.

Since the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, all forms of education, including distance education, have been looked to as a key instrument of political, social, and economic change. Article 41 of the Common Program of 1949 set the future course as follows:

The culture and education of the People's Republic of China are new democratic, that is, national, scientific, and popular. The main tasks for raising the cultural level of the people are: training of personnel for national construction work; liquidating of feudal, comprador, fascist ideology; and developing of the ideology of serving the people. (as cited in Kaplan, Sobin & Andors, 1979, p. 217)

Now that the future course has been set, what remains under examined is the extent to which distance education has been used as a means to increase access, and as a way to reduce inequality by giving new opportunities to those who have not fully benefited from regular higher education in China. One of Mao's most important educational philosophies was "equality." In response to Mao's call, the Central People's Government in October, 1951, stated that all working people should enjoy the right to education (Yu & Xu, 1988). Can distance education in China enhance the right to education as Westerners have advocated? If so, to what degree can it do so? The remainder of this article focuses on this vibrant discussion of enhancing the right to education by using distance education to increase access, equity and higher educational opportunities.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

John Daniel, UNESCO's Assistant Director-General for Education, advocated that education is a right in addition to enhancing individual freedom and yielding important development benefits ("Speeches," 2002). According to the World Education Report 2000, the right to education is a fundamental human right. It occupies a central place in human rights and is essential and indispensable for the exercise of all other human rights and for development ("World Education Report," n.d.).

Traditionally, China was known for its educational system for the elite and for its imperial examination system. Although China's educational professionals use distance education to reach its vast masses that have been left out of its mainstream educational system, distance education may occupy a marginal place in the realm of education. From correspondence studies, Radio/TV broadcasts, to the current internet based instruction, distance education has gone a long way to accommodate the learning needs of youth and adults in China. Its existence has been legitimized as China gradually reformed herself into a market economy. While distance education in the past was politicized in China, distance education in its present form may serve to enhance the right to education, individual freedom and important development benefits as advocated by UNESCO's assistant director-general. The right to education should be universal and should not be distorted by any one country because of its ignorance.

## **METHOD**

Patton (2002) defines content analysis in qualitative analysis as referring to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings (p. 453). The literature on distance education in China can be treated as a special case and therefore can be content analyzed. Patton (2002) further argues that the core meanings found through content analysis are often called patterns or themes in qualitative analysis. The patterns and themes found using Patton's content analysis method were obvious.

While distance education during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution did little to enhance the right to education by increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities due to its highly politicized curricula, it was in the Post Mao era that distance education was used to promote the education and training of the masses in China who were left out of the mainstream education, which is education for the elite. And it was in this era that distance education was perceived positively by both the Chinese higher authorities and the general public. While reviewing the special case regarding distance education in China, the researcher gradually made sense of this social phenomenon by contrasting, comparing, replicating, cataloguing and classifying the object of study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Merriam, 1998).

### **History and Current Practice of Distance Education in China**

Like in any other nations, distance education in China originates in correspondence courses. In the Western Hemisphere, distance education, with its roots also in correspondence education, has had more than 150 years of history in the United States (Gibson, 2006, p. 148). Correspondence courses were used to reach adult learners in China. Later, radio and television broadcasts and independent study were added to distance education. At the beginning of the New China (1949), distance education was launched as a means to instill among Chinese people vigilance against foreign, imperialist oppression. In other words, the West's so-termed "democratic individualism" was viewed as a key threat to the Chinese people and one that had to be rooted out through distance education (Kaplan, Sobin & Andors, 1979). At the same time, distance education had the concrete task of providing the people with the skills required for rapid economic development. According to Kaplan, Sobin and Andors (1979), illiteracy was estimated at 85% in 1949 in China and the first educational

priority was a massive assault on illiteracy. Towards this end, distance education together with other forms of education such as “short course schools” for workers and peasants, spare-time schools, vocational middle schools (consisting of technical and teacher-training divisions) flourished throughout China (as cited in Wang & Bott, 2003-2004, pp. 33-34). With regard to the right to education, the head of the Supervision Department of the Ministry of Education did make the following remarks:

The country’s new educational system will guarantee that all working people and their children will have the opportunity to enjoy educational facilities, thus enabling the country to cultivate more effectively every type of constructive talent from among the people. (Kaplan, Sobin & Andors, 1979, p. 218)

Given the history of education for the elite in China, a source of repeated controversy is whether China had the ability to be provided with a skilled workforce and an adequate knowledge base for development. Then, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), a movement that was to dominate China’s educational climate for more than a decade, brought distance education to a state of neglect. All schools and colleges, including radio and television broadcasts, correspondence or independent study programs were closed. In response to Mao’s stress on the “unity of theory and practice,” Mao’s educational philosophy was translated into “walking on two legs” which was manifested in two major directions: the direct interaction of educational institutions with productive labor and the establishment of self-supported schools by factories and commune units (as cited in Wang & Bott, 2003-2004, p. 34). Distance education for the sake of educating and training the Chinese people was almost non-existent during this period. Radio and television broadcasts were used not to promote educational outcomes, but to purge the bourgeois dictatorship and boost the morale of the proletariat. According to Mao’s teaching, class background was treated as the criterion for social upward mobility (Li, 1996).

In the current post-Mao era in China (1977-present), a number of profound changes took place, including distance education. Almost all universities added distance education courses to accommodate the needs of working adults. Distance education programs in workers’ colleges in the cities and peasants’ colleges in the countryside flourished throughout China. For those youth who fail to pass the entrance exams to regular universities and colleges in China, they can choose to enroll in a distance education program either in the city or in the countryside depending on where they live. Those who go to workers’ colleges or peasants’ colleges still need to take entrance exams. However, their test scores are considerably lower than those required for regular universities and colleges. To reinforce the right to education, state TV stations and state radio stations launched free distance education programs to all who were interested in learning. For example, the British supported “Follow Me” English program via China Central TV reached millions of Chinese people in the early 1980s. And some people learned to master the English language by attending this TV distance education program. According to Wang and Kreysa (2006), China’s distance education programs traditionally offered degree and diploma courses in engineering, agriculture, forestry, teaching training, humanities, natural sciences, finance and economics, political science and law. In 1983 alone, 50 courses in five science and engineering specialties, and 40 courses in seven economics specialties were available (Yu & Xu, 1988). In the more recent drive to realize the four modernizations, vocational education and English were added to the distance education programs in China (Lee, 2004). The following table (Table 1) reflects the development of China’s distance education and it was derived from Wang and Kreysa’s 2006 research.

Table 1: Distance Education Programs and Total Enrollment Information in China

Year	Names of Distance Education Programs	Enrollment Information
1957	58 correspondence divisions attached to regular universities	35,000 students
1957	36 evening schools	12,000 students
1962	116 correspondence divisions attached to regular universities	95,000 students
1962	72 evening schools	29,000 students
1966-1976	0	0
1979	72 correspondence divisions attached to regular universities	241,000 students
1989	All Correspondence divisions attached to regular universities	530,000 students
1989	All evening schools	178,000 students
1990-2000	Internet and Web based instruction	10 million
2004	All distance education programs	15.8 million

The number (15.8 million) of students reached by distance education is much higher than the total 4.2 (year 2004 only) traditional age students educated and trained in traditional universities and colleges in China (Wang & Kreysa, 2006). As of 1999, the number of Chinese internet users increased to 8.9 million from 620,000 in 1997 (“Distance Education,” 2000). By the end of 2000, the number had jumped to 10 million and it was expected to reach 20 million by 2003 (“Distance Education,” 2000). Table 2 describes the scale of online learning and its enrollment information in China as of 2000. By 2002, 31 educational websites sponsored by different universities had offered seats to nearly 190, 000 registrants (“Distance Learning,” 2002). It must be pointed out that online learning in China is still disproportionate to its large population waiting to be educated and trained for its modernization drive.

Table 2: Online Learning and Enrollment Information by 2000

Types of Institutions	Internet Enrollment Information	Courses Offered
Tsinghua University	1,740 graduate students	Business administration, Computer technology, Civil law
Zhejiang University	3,000 undergraduate students; 420 graduate students	Computer, English literature, Business administration
Hunan University	3,500 undergraduate students	Computer, English
Primary and Secondary Schools	10 million students	Math, Chinese
Schools in remote western regions (distance education projects under construction)	Information not available	Information not available

Table 2 was derived from Distance Education Opens Minds--Retrieved February 17, 2007, from [http://english.people.com.cn/english/200010/30/eng20001030\\_53911.html](http://english.people.com.cn/english/200010/30/eng20001030_53911.html) Although internet and web-based instruction has been an important component of distance education, it did not play an active role until the outbreak of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) in 2003. During the SARS outbreak, the Classroom of the Air, Online Teaching played a major role to guarantee learning off campus (Yang, 2005).

## REFLECTIONS

Mao Tse-tung's grand vision for China's future was that China would become a classless communist society as a result of the class struggle (Wang, 2004-2005). Therefore, he launched the Great Leap Forward (1949-1965) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China in an effort to achieve this goal. Distance education like any other forms of education had to be utilized to "unite theory with practice." To make this educational policy concrete, all curricula in distance education were politicized. Although "equality" is the second most important concept in Mao's educational philosophy (Kwong, 1983), the two political movements took distance education in China in a wrong direction. In addition to politicizing curricula, students and faculty in China were sent to farms and factories on a large scale:

Classroom-centered schooling was replaced by work-study programs; workers and farmers were dispatched to take up teaching and school-management positions; and full-time and institutional facilities were increasingly replaced by part-time and non-institutional programs. (Cheng & Manning, 2003, p. 359)

Although sporadic correspondence divisions and even schools did exist in China during the two political movements, the right to education was almost taken away from China's children and adults. Distance education did not help with equity or access. Higher educational opportunities were lost. Indeed, China was plunged into a struggle to realize the so-termed universal social equity, adults and some youths were forced to devote their lives to advancing political goals during the two political movements. To show that politics takes precedence over educational ones during these two political movements in China, students and faculty were not judged on their academic achievement or their occupational expertise but by how "red" they were (i.e., whether they were loyal to the supreme leader, Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese Communist Party) (Wang, 2004-2005). Given the fact that all other forms of education were almost done away with, the role distance education played was minimal in terms of increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities. During these two eras, China produced a premier who could not read or write in response to Mao's call to "equality."

It is probably unfair to say that curricula were totally politicized during the two movements in China because Mao's philosophy "uniting theory with practice" does reveal pragmatism to some extent. However, neither equality nor pragmatism could be implemented in China given the fact that distance education almost came to a standstill, let alone enhance the right to education by increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities. A person's right to education is enhanced when distance education is needed throughout one's lifetime to help respond to changes in the nature of work, navigate passages from one stage of development to another, accommodate new personal and professional situations. In a way, it is safe to say that the right to education in China remained on paper during the two political movements. Distance education did almost nothing to increase access, equity or higher educational opportunities.

The Post-1976 to present era marked a major change in distance education. Previously, farmers, workers without any professional expertise controlled distance education in China. Since 1976, professional educators have regained leadership over distance education and all other forms of education (Pepper, 1991, p.28). Although distance education is still under overall Party control, professional educators now enjoy greater preeminence than at any

time since the early 1950s (Pepper, 1991). Professional educators in China realized that distance education has the potential to provide education and training to millions of Chinese people whose higher educational opportunities were simply deprived of during the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward when distance education (mainly radio broadcast) was used to root out foreign influence and to counterattack tradition (Li, 1996).

In the recent drive to realize the four modernizations in China, distance education in the form of correspondence divisions, evening schools, TV/Radio universities and workers/peasants colleges flourished throughout the cities and the countryside. In 2004 alone, well over 15.8 million adult learners were reached by distance education. Since access, equity have been increased by using distance education, the right to education in China has been enhanced to a certain degree. However, it is worth pointing out that 15.8 million non-traditional learners are disproportionate to its large population of 1.3 billion. The vast majority of its adult population in China is not engaged in formal education provided by distance education. As more and more developed countries have emerged as learning societies, people in these countries are engaged in life-long learning. One of its chief providers of education and training is distance education. The father of adult education in the Western Hemisphere, Malcolm Knowles, predicted that education and training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would be delivered electronically (as cited in Wang, 2005, p. 35). This is so true when examining the number of online universities in the West produced in response to Knowles's prediction in the 1970s. Despite its criticisms, distance education in the West remains omnipotent. Given the long history of education for the elite in China, distance education has not been well recognized. For example, a person with a degree obtained from an evening university or college may have a hard time, finding a job. Those who normally seek a degree from a university characterized by distance education are those who already hold a degree from a traditional university and a career. They need a higher degree from whatever universities for professional development. For the sheer sake of increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities, distance education in China has failed to enhance the right to education in the Post Mao era because people seek distance education not for the sake of learning, but for social upward mobility via distance education. When this happens, the true meaning behind distance education is lost. It is well known to the outside world, due to inadequate resources and time and space limitations, several million Chinese high school graduates are denied a college education each year and there are well over 30 million adult illiterates in the country. Even though these people secure a degree from distance education, they are forever looked down upon in Chinese society. The right to education, access and equity to them might have remained a dream never to be realized in China.

Had it not been for the outbreak of SARS in 2003 in China, people would not have changed their attitude towards distance education, especially web-based instruction. Nowadays, distance education, the computer and the internet have been received synonymously and positively by the general public (Kelly, 2002). According to Mau (2003), about 10 million students from all levels of schools participate in distance learning through the internet. During the SARS outbreak, online teaching was used to guarantee that students could continue their learning off campus and not spread the epidemic. Today, mention of distance education in China makes one think of four major networks: the China Net work (ChinaNet), the China Golden Bridge Network (ChinaGBN), the China Education and Research Network (CERNET) and the China Science and Technology Network (CSTet) (as cited in Lee, 2004, p. 102). As China has become an integral part of the global economy, the Western concept of distance education should be accepted by China's leaders and educational professionals. Distance education should not be used only to combat an epidemic like SARS, but should be used to educate and train its citizenry. A country with a population of 1.3 billion cannot educate and train every learner, using traditional educational formats. Distance education can reach learners anywhere and any time. The convenience and flexibility it offers cannot be surpassed by any other forms of education. A close examination of how Westerners define distance education indeed shows that distance education is omnipotent:

- The working mother in rural Nebraska completing her bachelor's degree online through her local state university while her children sleep at night.
- The single young man in New York City studying for the GED exam via public television and telephone tutoring.
- The mid-career business woman executive pursuing her doctorate in education via a hybrid online and residency program in order to change careers.
- The retired bus driver engaged in a collaborative webinar for his class through a University of Beijing class on the Eastern perspective of global issues. (King, 2006, p.16)

In modern societies, Chinese people should not align distance education with politics. Distance education is capable of educating and training today's adults anywhere and any time whereas traditional education is limited in this regard. With today's cutting edge technology, a plethora of novel teaching approaches have emerged in distance education. Among them, constructivist approaches, problem-based learning models, learner-centered methods work well with today's adult learners. Regardless of any forms of education, the goal is the same, that is, to seek critical thinking skills on the part of the learners. Other scholars may use different terms to describe critical thinking skills. For example, to Mezirow (1978, 1981, 1990, 1991, 1997, 2000), the goal of any forms of education is to seek personal transformation and emancipation on the part of the learners. If distance education can achieve this goal, then it is valid education. World Education Report from UNESCO has set the direction for education, including distance education. In addition to enhancing individual freedom and yielding important development benefits, distance education does enhance one's right to education.

### **IMPLICATIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS**

The content analysis of distance education in its relationship to increasing **Access, Equity** and **Higher educational opportunities** does reveal a pattern and a theme. That is, distance education in China has evolved through three generations: (1) correspondence-based education, in an effort to eliminate illiteracy in the 1950s and 1960s; (2) Radio/TV-based education since the 1980's, in response to its open door policy and economic reforms; (3) advanced Distance Learning based on information and internet technologies evolved since the 1990's, as a result of fast development of information of technologies. However, access, equity and higher educational opportunities were not well addressed in China because distance education was used at the very beginning to advance political goals of a certain group of leaders. "Politics takes command" was a well accepted slogan during the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution. At that time, no one would care about whether one's learning was related to workforce competencies. Distance education like any other forms of education was geared towards turning learners into being "red," which was being loyal to the Communist Party and the supreme leader. The Post-Mao era did witness some attitudinal changes towards distance education in relationship to increasing access, equity and higher educational opportunities. Those learners who were left out of the imperial examination system could complete their education and training via distance education. However, those who obtain their degrees via distance education have proved to have had a hard time, finding employment in a country where ascribed status is still highly valued. It is true that Chinese people who are left out of mainstream education can access higher education via distance education. The problem is those who cannot afford to pay tuition fees are still left out of distance education. This problem is dire especially in the vast country side in China. Many faculty members from regular universities seek employment in distance education facilities for the sole purpose of lucrative gains. Their real teaching and research remain in regular universities and colleges. This is tantamount to saying that faculty members are not interested in seeking innovations in educating and training distance education learners. Although some China's leaders advocate that China will form a multifunctional distance learning network by the year 2010, in a move to establish an educational system in the country that serves people of all ages ("Education," 2000), many other leaders in China fail to



see the omnipotent power of distance education that can increase access, equity and higher educational opportunities. Some still believe that Chinese learners who are left out of mainstream education stay out of trouble by pursuing a degree via distance education. And they further believe that the status quo in Chinese society can be maintained this way. If “their thinking” is right, then “equity” in China is nowhere to be found. It remains only on paper in China.

The ridiculous fact is that SARS in China changed people’s attitude towards distance education to some extent and its relationship with access, equity and higher educational opportunities. Numerous studies in the West indicate that distance education is no better or no worse than traditional forms of education. Students achieve the same educational outcomes as they do via traditional education. Unless China’s leaders and educational professionals value distance education, access, equity and higher educational opportunities will remain a perennial problem, waiting to be solved. For a country with the largest population in the world, and the least number of regular institutions of higher learning, distance education does represent an alternative method of reaching out to its vast adult learners who may be left out of mainstream education. Distance learning—taking college courses via the computer—is a strategic choice to improve China’s overall education level (“Education,” 2000).

As China sends more and more scholars to study in traditional universities in Western industrialized nations such as Japan, USA, UK, Canada, Australia and Germany, it is high time that China’s leaders considered sending its scholars to study distance education in the West. Not only should China’s scholars learn from their advanced delivery systems in distance education in Western industrialized nations, but also their advanced teaching philosophies in distance education. It is these teaching philosophies that may change China’s educational professionals’ attitude towards distance education. Once their attitude is changed, access, equity and higher educational opportunities may be enhanced. Then the fundamental human right, which is the right to education, can be guaranteed. Although this article focuses on the content analysis of distance education in its relationship to access, equity and higher educational opportunities, this article does not try to be exclusive. As researchers and scholars focus on other aspects of distance education in China, different themes and patterns may emerge out of their studies. Other methods such as quantitative analysis and mixed methods research may be used in further analysis of distance education in its relationship to access, equity and higher educational opportunities for future studies of such nature. It is the researcher’s hope that this study will stir up further international research in distance education and its relationship to access, equity and higher educational opportunities. As China may emerge as the next economic engine in the Pacific Rim, will its distance education help produce enough skilled workforce for its fast economic development? If the problem of access, equity and higher educational opportunities cannot be solved, what adverse effects will this have on its national economic development plans? With these questions in mind, the researcher of this article invites you to enter into this journey with him and to share your research and understanding with our global academic community regarding distance education and its relationship to access, equity and higher educational opportunities. Above all, the right to education should be universal and should not be distorted by any one country because of its ignorance.

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