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“Connect with the outside world”

Exclusive interview with HUANG Shan, Associate Managing Editor, Editorial Board Member, Caixin Media, Beijing, China

If you could re-design the education system in China, what changes would you make?

Although I would not say that China's education system is a broken system, I am concerned that it is a system which cannot face the 21st century challenges. We have strongly emphasized the so-called quality education, however, we still have the old learning methods and the college entrance examination system; to a large extent, our educational system is still a system oriented by test scores, which fails to encourage students to think independently and present critical ideas about what has been taught. Therefore, for the next generation leaders, I think the key is to encourage critical learning methods in both classrooms and their daily lives. Most Chinese students are only taught to obey the authority, not challenge what they have been taught, because they need to pay respect to power and authority.

This type of ideologies and teaching method have not been changed for many generations in China. However, if we want to stand up to the 21st century challenges, we must change the mind-set and introduce a new type of learning methods and teaching methods. It is not just the responsibility of schools but also the decision makers. We must combine the top-down and the bottom-up approaches. First of all, the leaders and the education authorities must understand the key issues and challenges of teaching methods lie with teachers. If teachers do not have (or not trained to have) more critical views, they can hardly allow students to challenge them, then we will go nowhere in this innovative and competitive technological era.

Secondly, the bottom-up approach consists of NGOs and educational advocacy groups, they must learn from their international peers and adapt the international experience they have learnt to local conditions. I think we cannot just copy the whole set of a Western educational method to China. Instead, we must adapt it to the local conditions. Therefore, we need the joint forces of both education authorities and civic groups to shape our educational system and succeed in meeting the 21st century challenges.

Regarding the top-down approach, can you give an example of how the critical thinking might be introduced to China's current educational system?

For example, in China we have the college entrance examination which is the 'one-size-fits-all' test system, where colleges recruit students (almost only) based on their test scores. On the contrary, much more non-test-score-based performance is considered in the Western college entrance examination, for example, a student's extracurricular activities.

However, I am not saying that we should change the current system immediately, as it takes time to change. In China, there are a lot of elements standing in the way of fairness and justice. If too much weight is put on the non-test-score elements in the college recruitment process, it will be easier for the powerful and influential groups to manipulate the system, and less powerful people will be left behind. Therefore, we should combine the state of the art teaching methods and local conditions, and carry out experiment within some areas in the beginning.

For example, in more advanced Chinese cities like Beijing or Shanghai where students have more access to extracurricular activities, we can introduce more Western-like college entrance system which encourages students to learn outside of the classroom, and the test score will not be the only benchmark in deciding whether a student will be admitted or not. While for less developed regions in Southwest or Northwest China, I prefer to stick to the current method – which is the more standardized examination system. However, more open-ended questions should be designed and included in the test, there should not always be the only one right answer. It will help teachers encourage students to think and learn in a more critical way.

Furthermore, I have two detailed suggestions. Firstly, we need to strongly emphasize the role of English in our education system. Because English is the common language in the global business world. In addition, the most advanced work in science, engineering and other fields are mainly conducted in English. People who are not able to use English at work are excluded from the main stream of scientific and technological advances, as well as the globalized business world. Secondly, we need to reduce the weight of politics which currently is a mandatory discipline and included in most of the examinations.

On 3 September 2016, right before the G20 Summit in Hangzhou, China ratified Paris agreement to cut climate-warming emissions. What does it mean to the development of China's clean technology and renewable energy industries in the next 5 to 10 years?

I think that clean technology development and the green growth model is in China's national interest. Because green technology is one of the key economic fronts which every country devotes a large amount of resources to, for example, in the renewable energy field such as geothermal and wind power. In order to tap into the renewable sources, countries need to put in place the state of the art technologies, which can give them the edge in the technology competition over their peers. Therefore, I believe that it is in China's national interest to develop the green technologies.

In addition, 'going green' can also help address the serious problems of air, groundwater and soil pollution in China, which will improve the health and wellbeing of Chinese people. From the perspective of health care costs, Chinese government has the strong motivation to reduce the environmental pollution and correct the environmental degradation. Therefore, I believe that there is a bright future for clean technology and renewable energy industries in China.

Well, we also need the proper policy design to promote the fast growth of clean technology industry. China has promised to reach its emissions peak by 2030 and put strong incentives in place to support this goal. However, I think we should be more cautious about the 'Go green campaign' and the subsidy system for green technologies. There are many so-called new technology companies in China, which have received subsidy from the government but misused the subsidy and abused the subsidy system. We need to put in place the right incentives to encourage the real new technology companies, instead of wasting resources on those companies who only aim for subsidies.

With the economic slowing down and reducing demand in China, as well as the tightened environmental and climate policy constrains, some industries are facing severe challenges. In 2015 China saw growing strikes in mining, ironing, steel industries and sometimes also coal power plants. How will that impact China's political and economic policies? How about climate change and renewable energy policies?

Well, if you live in Beijing during the last few years, you would realize that the air quality actually has been improved, which is a side effect of the economic slowing down – many power plants, steel mills and cement plants have to shut down due to insufficient demand and overcapacity.

Meanwhile, overcapacity of steel and aluminium in China have become the target of the Western world. I think that Chinese government has decided to shift the economic growth model from export- and investment-driven economy to consumption-driven economy. One of the key features in this transition is the reduction of overcapacity, which will also ease the tensions of trade dispute between China and other countries.

Previously, China produced excessive steel, cement, iron and other products because of the strong demand from its booming real estate market and other infrastructure sectors. However, the demand has dropped substantially since the transition period of moving to service- and consumption-driven economy. Therefore, it is a good chance for Chinese government to realize how serious the problems are, and decide to reallocate its limited resources to more sustainable and environmental friendly areas.

Although the economic slow down might provide an opportunity for Chinese government to adjust its strategy for the economic transition, how about those workers who have lost or will soon lose their jobs? Will it be a big concern regarding the social stability?

Let me give you a number, Chinese government has promised to reallocate millions of industrial workers who are (or will be) laid off during the industrial restructuring. It is definitely not an easy task, and it will be a gradual process, but I think as long as Chinese government has made the promise, they have the money and other resources to help these workers. First of all, the government will provide proper training to these workers based on their existing skill sets, and help them transfer to

service industry. In addition, their families will also be supported for their pension and health care expenses.

Fortunately, Chinese government has the deep pocket to fulfil this job. China has a very diverse economy, consisting of regions facing serious poverty problems, and booming provinces which mainly lie in the coastal areas. Therefore, China can leverage the wealth and opportunities created by coastal provinces to support the less developed regions, as well as the people who are laid off during the industrial restructuring. Chinese central government is very powerful and has the authority to reallocate the resources among different regions. During the transition period, it will be beneficial to allow the central government to amass the money and spend it in a smarter way.

When we look at how countries participate in globalization, China accounts for a large share of global flows, especially in trade and FDI, but relatively limited in data flows. In a time when technological development evolves rapidly, how will that impact China's technological development and innovation in business?

Actually, quite a few Chinese tech giants have set up their R&D offices in Silicon Valley to collaborate with companies there. They have realized the importance to connect with the outside world. However, China's domestic internet system is still not fully connected with the outside world.

The temporary solution for now is to allow those Chinese companies to establish their overseas offices and cooperate with their foreign counterparties. However, China is also trying to forge the domestic internet ecosystem (partially disconnected with the global internet ecosystem). From a long-term perspective, it will definitely hinder the efficiency of data exchange, innovation and creativity. While at current stage, we can only have the temporary solution. Let us see whether Chinese government will allow more data flows and closer collaboration between Chinese companies and their foreign counterparties.

So it is a hope?

Yes, it is a hope.

This interview was conducted by Dr. Sophie Liu at the sidelines of stars Switzerland in September 2016 in Stein am Rhein.

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