

Preface

This book first appeared in Chinese 16 years ago. It is an analysis in the form of a prose, not a paper, of the field investigation records I made at the time. I studied literary criticism at university, so I have developed a preference and custom of delving into the details. The book is mostly an observation of details and I took great interest in writing about them. Reading it can still remind me of how pleasant it was to write it.

Education has been a focus of my research on culture. The education systems for universities, secondary schools and elementary schools provide the main channels for cultural production and inheritance in a society. Schools are fully cultural and often initiate cultural changes. However, besides being cultural, education facilitates the selection of the elites and the mobility of social strata and contributes to the vitality and health of the social structure and political framework and to social fairness and justice, so education is political. Education is so important that scholars from all fields need to study it from their own perspectives.

My rural mother was surprised when I left the Beijing-based Central Party School, for which I was working, for Fengning County, Hebei Province, to carry out research on elementary schools, asking, “Are elementary schools also the concern of the Central Party School?” The Central Party School of the Communist Party of China is tasked with training Party officials and conducting social scientific research and has the academic tradition of making field investigations of major issues in present-day China.

In this book, my focus is on two aspects of rural education in China. One is classroom instruction in elementary schools and the other is college entrance examinations for senior secondary schools. The former trains people while the latter selects them. I work to go into details concerning these aspects and keep true to specific issues. Fengning County, an ethnic minority region in the North, has historically been a culturally edge in China, and I choose a rural elementary school as contrast in China’s cultural center Qufu, Confucius’ home town. The school is located where Confucius was born. I also observe several schools in today’s China from the point of view of the country’s modern education history and its process of modernization. I want to understand some little things from a grand perspective.

In my book, I use an anthropological approach, which helps a lot. Anthropology may be the closest to literature which I majored, and I have a long passion for it. As anthropology is about people and how they live, it keeps academic research from being divorced from the life of people and is quite fascinating. Having temporarily left my academic post, I am now engaged in practical work for communication purposes, but I continue to make an anthropological observation about work and life. This adds to the meaning of my work.

Reading this book again, I have been inspired to attempt more academic research: publishing my northern book's southern sequel based on research on rural schools in Fujian Province where I am working.

I would like especially thank Mr. Wu Hao for helping publish this English version. I also want to thank Mr. Tong Xiaohua for translating the book. I have never met Mr. Tong before, but I have long admired him for his talent and spirit. Thanks should also go to the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press and Springer, reliable bridges between Chinese and international academia.

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Shulei Li

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Li, S.

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