

Into a new orbit

changing China's higher education system

in person

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China Agricultural University Press

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Foreword

Whose constellations count?

We hope this book will show you how new “constellations” are created by people who are willing to explore unknown space enthusiastically, as the author and her contributors have done with so much energy and devotion.

Albert Einstein said, “A human being is a part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. And yet we experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest—a kind of optical illusion of our consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for only the few people nearest us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature.”

Now that the Chinese people are struggling with the processes of individualization and privatization and with the pervasive power of commercialization and the materialism that are the emerging result, we need more strength to free ourselves from these restrictions — more strength to shape a constellation that might not be affected by these optical illusions.

For a long time, being enrolled in one of the country’s universities

has been viewed as a great achievement by most students in China, especially after passing the exigent entrance examinations, which block entry for many. However, after entering university, many students feel confused and disillusioned about having so little time to explore new ideas. They are assigned so many tasks by their tutors and thesis supervisors that they have no time to think about what it all means. Gradually, everyone — students, their tutors and supervisors — finds him- or herself going around in a very fixed orbit, guided mostly by a confining nearby “world”. In the field of education for rural development, we are facing a similar situation.

Strongly tied to this university working environment is the country's broader political and economic context. China has a strong planning system, which puts the government in the key decision-making position. The education system has been an integral part of this system. The enhancement of high-tech and “hard” sciences along with the preferential treatment of programs dealing with development planning for secondary industries have been at the core of recent educational policies. Research and development funds are assigned to areas that have little to do with the diversity of rural realities.

University graduates in rural or agricultural specialties are expected to be direct contributors to the development of new crop or animal varieties, new techniques for planting and animal husbandry, or the dissemination of government-selected and recommended technologies that do not always match farmers' needs. More recently, with the country experiencing a transition to a market-based economy, the government is strongly insisting that technology development must adapt to market needs. However, the reality is that “perfect” marketing conditions do not exist. There are many roadblocks, for example, related to information dissemination and price setting. Farmers are particularly affected and have little or no control over key

elements. University education has a hard time catching up with these new and often contradictory changes.

Creating space for genuine innovation

In the process of opening up Chinese society, most attention is focused on the convergence of urbanization and modernization. Often neglected is the fact that the gaps between urban and rural and between people working in different professional fields related to these different social realities are growing. In parallel, little attention is paid or respect given to different or divergent voices. Nevertheless, development as freedom is now pursued by many with the goal of poverty alleviation in the 21st century.

Agriculture for development was the main topic of the 2008 World Development Report. In China, although agriculture and rural development are still of relatively modest importance, they are attracting the government's attention, initially in terms of economics (such as freeing up pricing and marketing), but gradually in a more multidimensional way. One example of this is the interest in integrated, locally driven natural resource management approaches, which have been practiced since the mid-1990s, and are now becoming better known.

It seemed like a good idea to introduce these new, more integrated and community-based practices (and the principles and methods that inform them) into the higher education system. This book describes a pioneering example of how this idea is being put into practice. This example is showing encouraging results of collectively taking action, not just on paper, but through successively designed and executed activities involving a multiplicity and diversity of actors, including

students, teachers, rural development professionals and people in rural communities.

Zhang Li, the principal author of this book, and her collaborators in the research and writing — all of them brave participants in this process of changing higher education — offer interesting insights into the dynamics and impact of this example. Combining quantitative data with life story analysis, this tracer study illustrates a way to build an open platform for integrating different research perspectives and methods. The author and contributors have been able to give an authentic voice to various local people and distill a variety of experiences and explanations. As such, this book also serves as a strong critique of linear and one-dimensional perspectives that are so often still the basis for the design and implementation of development interventions.

The tracer study details how the Mainstreaming Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) initiative is putting university students at centre stage. The initiative addresses the core of the two restrictions mentioned above: one imposed by university authorities and higher education policies, the other by the increasingly invisible hand of the market. The pioneers in the mainstreaming initiative hypothesized that if students are considered key agents of their own development and if they could integrate this attitude into rural development initiatives, a new “constellation” could emerge and create a more valuable world.

Of course, many obstacles must be overcome before a new constellation takes shape. The first is people's thinking. The high value placed on material things and efficiency, the main products of the technological revolution of the 20th century, is making many people blind to other values. Important questions are ignored, such as how to build and sustain harmonious relations among people, fostering dialogue, building trust, and achieving equality, a workable

democracy, and fair governance. The second is finding a way to turn answers to these questions into practice, and the third is how to integrate the dispersed efforts of people trying such new practices or, at least, start a dialogue among them.

As the CBNRM mainstreaming initiative and this book (which is part of it) demonstrate, these obstacles can only be overcome if there are people who are willing to break conventional rules and are encouraged to envision and build a new constellation. Breaking this new ground requires a diversity of efforts and strong collaboration, which, perhaps, is the most difficult roadblock to overcome.

We are, therefore, very happy to see conventional relations, rules, and practices being changed in Chinese higher education, as so vividly described and analyzed here. The changes in both the “inner world” of higher education and higher education’s interface with rural communities represent a fundamental reconfiguration of the relations among and between supervisors, students, local researchers, officials, other outsiders to rural life, and farmers. These changes are at the heart of the participatory curriculum development process described here, in which dialogue, exchange, critical reflection, peer support, and other collective action are central.

These changes are best looked at as a whole, not as individual pieces. By taking joint action, we see that our life-worlds are not just pieced-together external context, but a development arena. The students involved in the CBNRM mainstreaming efforts — whose stories will unfold in the following pages — through a critical interpretation of their own and others’ experiences, are the key actors in this social learning process. From the universities to rural realities, from one space and culture to another, the transformative process brought about by themselves is becoming a new reality, a new constellation built jointly with others, step by step.

This inspiring book makes us think about the possibilities of reshaping relations and constructing a new reality, a daring journey into a new orbit indeed.

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First, I want to thank all those who responded to the questionnaire used in the study, those who contributed CBNRM life stories, and all the key informants who were interviewed. Thank you for trusting me and sharing your ideas and stories. I was moved and inspired by your enthusiasm and what you told me. I cannot forget how you sacrificed your holidays to answer my questionnaire and built stories with me, the interest you showed in being interviewed, and how you looked forward to reading the results of this study.

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Last, but not least, thanks to all the CBNRM family members. You are making CBNRM a reality in China, including my tracer study.

This is truly our book.

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Launching the initiative

“China’s society is changing rapidly, and the traditional way of organizing and managing the higher education system is no longer adequate. There is a clear recognition that an education system based on a rigid top-down planned approach will no longer provide the country with the necessary human resources to achieve modernization.”

Zhou Ji, Minister of Education, China, 2006

“There is a gap between rural reality and agricultural education... Since the agricultural education system cannot catch up with the rapid change of rural development, the students cannot meet the needs of rural development after they have graduated. The education system needs to change. We should learn together with farmers, trying to understand rural reality.”

Li Xiaoyun, Dean, College of Humanities and
Development, China Agricultural University
(key informant interview, April 2008)

Integrating community-based natural resource management into Chinese higher education

To make rural development studies more relevant and to contribute to the reform of the higher education system that is currently underway in China, a group of pioneers, including university staff, researchers, students, and farmers joined forces to launch an innovative, participatory curriculum-development process. The initiative focuses around two courses: Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM), offered by the College of Humanities and Development (COHD) of the China Agricultural University (CAU) in Beijing since 2005; and Participatory Rural Development (PRD), delivered by Jilin Agricultural University (JLAU) in Changchun since 2006.

The participatory curriculum-development process is part of a larger initiative led by COHD, entitled “Mainstreaming Community-Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) in Chinese Higher Education.” This initiative was born when two urgent needs collided. First, China needed innovative ideas for reforming the higher education system (as exemplified by the words of Zhou Ji, the minister of education, quoted above). Second, capable people were needed to solve natural resource management and rural development problems (as stated concisely by Li Xiaoyun, COHD’s dean in the second quote).

The courses have now been running for four years at COHD and for three years at JLAU, and a number of other universities in China have begun to adopt and adapt key elements of the initiative. The

experiences of the people involved in this work — their initial achievements, the challenges they faced, and the lessons they learned — have been documented in a number of publications (Qi Gubo et al. 2008, Vernooy et al. 2008, Zhang Li et al. 2008). However, several questions remain. After three years of collective effort, what impact is the initiative having on the students, teachers, and organizations that have been involved in the process? Has the initiative contributed to actual policy changes as expected? To answer these questions, a tracer study was designed to follow the professional and personal paths of a select number of the pioneers.

In this book, we briefly review the mainstreaming initiative, then “zoom in” on the tracer study. The study combined qualitative and quantitative assessment methods. A questionnaire was used to assess the general impact on people’s professional and personal development and the life history method was used to deepen understanding of how and why these impacts occurred. Focus group discussions and key informant interviews were used to triangulate information and also to look into organizational change and policy influence. This work was very much experimental, as no previous examples of this research method and assessment dynamics could be found in China.

This book presents a first-hand, lively picture of how the initiative is contributing to individuals’ professional development, in terms of changes in attitude, knowledge accumulation, and skill development. It also describes the initiative’s influence on their personal development; their increased confidence and their growing empathy toward the people they work with.

The book also summarizes changes occurring at the organizational and policy levels. The personal stories tell us that change or reform originates from within people, but requires the creation of strong links

to produce synergy. The stories are a testimony to the collective capacity of people to create opportunities for innovation, leading to new avenues of cooperation that are both a conduit and an outcome of the change efforts. In this process, some people find themselves “launched into a new orbit” — transformed by their involvement in and learning from the mainstreaming initiative.

Rejuvenating higher education in China

In the context of a rapidly changing China, the country requires more better trained human resources — people are able to tackle both theoretical and practical questions. According to many, the current higher education system no longer meets the needs of society. The widening gap between supply and demand cries out for reform of the higher education system.

On 3 March 2004, the State Council approved the 2003—2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education, developed by the Ministry of Education. This plan was the fundamental blueprint to be used by all those involved in education to further implement the strategies of Rejuvenating China through Science and Education and Reinvigorating China through Human Resource Development and to accelerate educational reform and development in the coming years (Zhou Ji 2006).

In the field of rural development, there has been a growing understanding, including among Chinese professionals, that natural resource management and rural development problems are complex, diverse, and in constant flux. To analyze these problems, carry out interventions, and assess alternatives, various researchers are arguing