

Gu Mingyuan's Educational Thought: Educational Philosophy through China's Reform and Opening Up, edited by Yingjie Wang

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Since the 20th century, pedagogy has progressively evolved with deeper theoretical insights and increasing interdisciplinary integration. In this process, educational research in China, particularly since the “reform” and “opening up” of the political economy of Chinese society from the late 1970s and early 1980s, has undergone significant transformation and restructuring. Scholars such as Gu Mingyuan, through reflections on comparative education and educational practice, have engaged in profound discussions on core issues, such as “What is education, for whom, and how is it possible?”, from a Marxist perspective. They emphasise a “people-centred” approach and strive for a dialectical unity between individual development and national modernisation, cultural traditions and societal change. Their aim is to offer clear value guidance and methodological support for educational practice. Building on this foundation, the book *Gu Mingyuan's Educational Thought: Educational Philosophy*



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through China's Reform and Opening Up systematically explores fundamental topics such as “the essence, value, and purpose of education” (Wang 2025, 20), drawing on Gu Mingyuan’s experience in both Chinese educational practice and global comparative research. It provides a comprehensive overview of the development of education in China since the reform and opening up. The book highlights the tensions and synergies between education and social change, traditional culture and globalisation, national strategy and the holistic development of individuals. It offers fresh theoretical perspectives for understanding contemporary Chinese educational reform and contributes China’s insights and discourse to the global development of educational philosophy.

This book is authored by several distinguished scholars in the field of Chinese education. Grounded in the realities of China, it employs a diverse array of research methods, including historical analysis, literature review, policy analysis, field studies, data analysis, and modelling. With a detailed and insightful approach, the book delves into the pressing educational issues that China faces. It highlights the distinctiveness of Chinese education from multiple perspectives, covering a broad spectrum of topics—from historical traditions to the demands of modernisation, and from fostering individual development to engaging in the process of globalisation. The book addresses key educational challenges arising during periods of social transformation, exploring areas such as the comprehensive advancement of regional educational reforms, the educational challenges posed by urbanisation, issues of educational equity and equality, the enhancement of educational quality, classroom teaching, and educational assessment. Specifically, it investigates how to implement educational reforms at various administrative levels in such a vast country, how to align education policies with the rapidly changing demographic structure, urban development, and industrial shifts; how to guarantee every child’s right to education and equal opportunities; and how to ensure education quality through the introduction of professional monitoring systems for scientifically assessing students’ academic performance.

This book is structured into 12 chapters. The first chapter examines and analyses various definitions of education from both ancient and modern perspectives, in China and abroad, and addresses the fundamental question: “What are the essence, the value, and the purpose of education?” The essence of education influences other educational issues; its value pertains to social significance, and its purpose centres on talent development. These three aspects are interconnected, and differing interpretations lead to variations in educational concepts. Under the guidance of Marxism, Gu Mingyuan integrates both Chinese and Western educational philosophies, emphasising the connection between theory and practice.

Building on this foundation, the second chapter explores the core of Gu Mingyuan’s educational philosophy and practice: promoting the modernisation of Chinese education and advocating for the transformation of traditional education into a more modern approach. As Ikeda notes, “Promoting the modernization of Chinese education” is “Gu’s

primary philosophy” (Ikeda and Gu 2013, 1). His educational philosophy, aligned with the times, has had a profound impact on China’s educational reform and development, driving innovation and progress in this field.

The third chapter, centred on the theme of “Teacher Professionalism and Student Agency”, examines the key elements of school education. It highlights the central roles of both teachers and students, emphasising the professional qualities of teachers and the active agency of students. The chapter further explores how changes in their interactions have led to the transformation of teacher-student relationships.

The fourth chapter, drawing on Gu Mingyuan’s teaching experience, highlights his unique perspectives and practical approaches to curriculum and teaching research in basic education. Building on this foundation, the fifth chapter explores his insights and practical models of school management and leadership. In the context of advocating for scientific management, democratic management, and distributed leadership, Gu Mingyuan asserts that only education-driven principles can effectively lead schools.

The sixth chapter centres on the teacher professionalisation system and provides a systematic exploration of Gu Mingyuan’s key theoretical viewpoint that “teaching is a specialised profession” (Zhu 2008, 7). This perspective has significantly advanced the professionalisation of teacher education.

The seventh chapter broadens the focus to the field of higher education, reviewing Gu Mingyuan’s involvement with it. It explores the topic of “the ideal of the university and higher education reform” (Gu 1997, 16) from three perspectives: the ideal of the university, global higher education reforms, and China’s higher education reform, offering his deep theoretical reflections.

The eighth chapter offers a thorough analysis of the changes in China’s education system and policies since the reform and opening up. It highlights the critical role of building an effective education system in determining the success or failure of the reform.

The ninth chapter focuses on the development and construction of the field of education, emphasising its significant role within Gu Mingyuan’s broader educational philosophy. As both an observer and active participant in China’s educational reform, Gu Mingyuan has consistently underscored the importance of the cultural dimension.

“Although education is a part of culture, it remains relatively independent from general culture. Compared to other major fields such as economics and politics, education is more profoundly influenced by culture” (Gu 2013, 4). As a result, the tenth chapter explores the traditions, transformations, and contemporary significance of Chinese education from a cultural standpoint.

The eleventh chapter further explores his unique insights into the relationship between China's social development and educational reform. Finally, the twelfth chapter, through Gu Mingyuan's analysis of current changes, offers a forward-looking perspective on the future of Chinese education and outlines potential directions for its reform and development.

Overall, this book is rooted in the social changes and educational practices in China over the past 40 years since the reform and opening up. It integrates multiple perspectives, including educational philosophy, the history of education, and cultural studies, to systematically analyse the topic and build a comprehensive theoretical framework of Chinese educational thought. The book notably incorporates Gu Mingyuan's firsthand experience in basic education, higher education, and educational management, linking his personal educational journey, the development of national education policies, and a comparative view of global educational reform. This approach underscores a keen awareness of pressing issues and practical concerns. The book offers fresh insights and valuable references for understanding China's unique path to educational modernisation, unravelling the internal dynamics of the relationship between education and social development, and constructing an educational philosophy that draws from Chinese experience and cultural heritage within the context of globalisation. It also provides a solid foundation for future research on Gu Mingyuan's educational thought and the development of China's educational discourse system.

Despite the solid achievements this book has made in systematically organising the historical context, theoretical structure, and practical concerns of Gu Mingyuan's educational thought, there are still areas that could benefit from further refinement. On one hand, the book is structured as a collection of essays, with different authors addressing specific topics in each chapter. The content primarily focuses on literature analysis and the history of ideas, but the exploration of internal tensions and the broader philosophical discussion is somewhat limited. Therefore, future research could benefit from a more in-depth and systematic examination of the overall theoretical framework, the connections between different ideological traditions, and a more comprehensive philosophical interpretation of core concepts. On the other hand, while the book extensively cites Gu Mingyuan's key writings from various periods and provides a detailed analysis of their historical context, it falls short in offering a systematic exploration of how these ideas have concretely influenced contemporary school reforms, teacher professional development, and student learning experiences. Future research could further deepen the investigation by focusing on the empirical aspects of educational practice, offering theoretical responses to emerging issues, and providing comparative analyses of different theoretical traditions.

Undoubtedly, this book makes a significant and unique contribution by examining Gu Mingyuan's educational thought through the intersection of educational philosophy and comparative education. It systematically explores the historical development, theoretical structure, and practical implications of his ideas, all deeply rooted in the

educator's ultimate concern for society, culture, and humanity. This work serves as an important academic reference for a deeper understanding of China's path to educational modernisation, the interaction between education and cultural traditions, and the evolution of educational systems and higher education since the reform and opening up. In doing so, it plays a positive and enduring role in promoting Chinese education on the global stage, while also advancing the internationalisation of higher education and fostering cross-cultural dialogue.

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