

## Book Review

Wei, Runfang (2008) *China's Radio and TV Universities and the British Open University: a comparative study*. Nanjing: Yilin Press.

This book is a major contribution to the fields of distance education research, the field of comparative education and to the history of Chinese and British education.

The book undertakes an impossible task: the comparative study of China's Radio and TV universities and of the British Open University. The task is impossible because the two entities to be compared are essentially disparate. The British Open University (OUUK) is a single university set up at Milton Keynes in the United Kingdom by Royal Charter. China's Radio and TV universities, known as the *Dianda* system, is a network of 45 open universities set up all over China. The essence of the success of the British Open University was its creation as a full university, offering its own university degrees on the same level as all the other universities in the country. The *Dianda* institutions were set up in what Wei calls the 'adult higher education sector' in China, offering what Wei calls sub-degrees and always regarded as inferior both to the great Chinese universities (Beijing University, Qinghua University, Fudan University and Tongji University) and also to the ordinary Chinese universities.

Wei addresses these problems by setting out her book in a structure which studies side by side the characteristics of the Chinese network and the British university. In this she is very successful and produces a major book based on in-depth research into both Chinese and British education, backed up by detailed citation of both British and Chinese government educational documentation (all Chinese documentation is cited in English). The book has 8 chapters, 394 pages and about 155.000 words.

The first theme addressed by Wei is a global overview of distance education. She covers distance education in Europe, in the Americas, in Asia, Oceania and Africa. Then she presents major (western) theories of distance education focusing on Wedemeyer, Holmberg, Moore, Peters and Keegan. 35 references conclude this section.

The second theme is the establishment of China's RTVUs (Radio and Television Universities) and the OUUK (Open University of the United Kingdom). Here Wei establishes the structure she is to follow for the rest of the book. Each chapter is structured as follows: the chapter theme is announced. Then sub-themes are presented (in this case Country Profile, Background of Establishment, Mission), then side by side studies of the sub-theme for China and for the UK are presented, this is followed by a conclusion which attempts to compare the Chinese data with the UK data. The chapter concludes with references (in this case 48) from both Chinese and western literature and tables (in this case four).

As one would expect, the figures in the tables, especially for China are very large, but Wei constructs her tables with great clarity so that their impact is clear cut. This study is important for the precision of the detail of the establishment of the Chinese *Dianda* system in 1979 and the OUUK in 1969, and for the richness of the documentation from the Chinese Ministry of Education and the United Kingdom DES (Department of Education and Science) and DfES (Department for Education and Skills).

The treatment of the foundation of the *Dianda* system and the OUUK is valuable because I can always remember reading all I could find on the Chinese system when I was first invited to China for the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebrations of the foundation of the Chinese system in 1989. My conclusion from reading these western analyses was 'this system cannot work'. On my arrival in China I invited a Chinese academic who spoke good English to what we would call a pub, and asked him how does the system work? What do the professors do Monday to Friday? What do the students do Monday to Friday? As he replied to my questions the penny finally dropped and I realized what the previous Western analyses had missed. Three years leave on full pay. That was what made the system work. I said to myself that I could probably do a pretty good distance education degree, if I received three years leave on full pay and was guaranteed a promotion position in my factory or office when I completed the study.

The third theme in Wei's study is titled 'Structure of China's RTVUs and the OUUK'. Here the sub themes are Governmental Structure, Organizational Structure and Financial Structure followed by conclusion, references (34) and tables (4). Quoting from Chinese government Research Centre 2008 documentation, Wei tells us that the present structure of the *Dianda* system is one C(entral)RTVU in Beijing, 44 provincial and special city open universities, 956 civic-level R(egional)TVU colleges, 1875 county-level work stations and 3294 teaching and learning centres. She shows how the organizational structure of China's RTVUs parallels China's system of central and four-tier local government administration.

On financial matters she gives a competent and detailed account of the funding of UK universities and the OUUK in particular. She traces the complex changes in UK government financial management from the UGC (University Grants Committee), which was replaced in 1988 by the UFC (Universities Funding Council), and in 1992 by the HEFC (Higher Education Funding Council) and then the HEFEC (England), HEFECs (Scotland) and HEFECW (Wales). She shows how the funding of the OUUK was different from that of other British universities. At the start the OUUK was funded directly by the DES (Department of Education and Science) and not by the UGC. In 1992 the funding of the OUUK and other British universities converged and was channeled through the HEFC and more recently the OU was funded by the HEFCE, HEFCS, HEFCW, the TDA (Training and Development Agency), other UK government departments and the EU. She

concludes with a detailed breakdown of all income and expenditure for the year 2007.

Wei's next theme is 'Teaching in China's RTVUs and the OUUK'. The sub themes are: Program Development China/OUUK, Course Development China/OUUK, Course Presentation China/OUUK followed by conclusion, 47 references, including extensive CRTVU and OUUK official documents, and 9 tables. In the early days Program Development was handled by the CRTVU in Beijing, a university which did not enrol students but which produced learning materials for the 44 open universities all over China. The system worked like this: the students who were chosen by the Party to study in the *Dianda* system received three years leave on full pay. Each day they went to their factory as before but turned aside from their work place to the Education Centre. There they received the TV lectures from Beijing, often by famous professors from leading Chinese universities, and then tutorials from their mentors. They studied the print materials for each course which generally included the course book, teacher's book, study guide and workbook, again centrally developed by the CRTVU in Beijing. At the end of their study they were guaranteed a promotion position in their work place.

The OUUK teaching system in the early days also had a TV and print focus. The TV programmes were developed by OUUK professors in conjunction with the BBC and transmitted by the BBC. Research by Bates, the OUUK's leading researcher on educational technology, showed that the OUUK spent 20% of its budget on TV which represented 5% of its teaching package. The printed materials and science kits were the major component of the OUUK teaching and learning materials. Developed by massive course teams, often numbering over 20 members, the A4 course books quickly became famous for their didactic quality and were included on the reading lists for degrees at the other British, face-to-face universities. Wei describes the process thus: 'The OUUK considers the educational structure of the materials as the most critical issue in distance education since the teacher and learner are separated from each other. Namely, in course development they have to build the teaching and learning process into the course materials, the process of not only what to learn but also how to learn' (2008:145).

The next theme is 'Learning in China's RTVUs and the OUUK'. Sub themes are: Learners China/OUUK, Learning China/OUUK, Learner Support China/OUUK, followed by conclusion, references and tables (18 tables giving detailed analysis of enrolments at the *Dianda* system 1986-2007 and at the OUUK 1971-2006).

The next theme is the 'Influence of higher education tradition upon China's RTVUs and the OUUK'. The sub themes are Ancient Form of Higher Education China/UK, Modern Higher Education China/UK and Adult Higher Education China/UK again followed by conclusion, references and tables. Wei's treatment of this theme is clouded by her presentation of both Chinese higher education

and Chinese adult higher education. This distinction does not exist in English where higher education is tertiary education usually for the 18+ age group and therefore automatically 'adult'. The distinction in English is between 'higher education' and 'further education', though Wei uses the term 'further education' rarely. The crux of this problem is, as Wei writes on page 112 'Qualifications earned for RTVU programs were equal to those awarded by conventional two- or three-year specialized colleges and institutions in China, which were similar in level to an associate degree from a community college in the US or a foundation degree in the UK, but below the B.Sc/B.A. level of education.' Essential to the success of the OUUK, on the other hand, was that it was set up with degrees of the same standard as any other British university, and that it was set up by Royal Charter with the right to award its own university degrees as was any other British university.

The penultimate study has the title 'Nature of China's RTVUs and the OUUK'. Again the structure is the same. The sub themes are: Idea of Higher Education China/UK, Role of Higher Education China/UK, Nature of China's RTVUs and Nature of the OUUK, conclusion and references. She gives as her theorists of education John Henry Newman in Ireland, Karl Jaspers of Germany and Clark Kerr in the USA. I would have preferred John Henry Newman in Ireland, Wilhelm von Humboldt in Germany and Matthew Arnold in England. She gives as the three sources for Chinese higher education thought Confucianism, western liberalism and Maoism.

The final chapter is called 'Tentative thoughts on theory and practice' and gives Wei's views on the field of distance education today. The sub-headings are: Reflections on distance education theory, distance education and open learning, distance education theory in China, reflections on distance education practice, China's RTVUs in the 1980s, China's RTVUs in the 1990s, China's RTVUs in the new century and conclusion followed by references and index. On western distance education theory she brings the treatment nearer to the present by adding analyses of Verduin and Clark in the US and Garrison and Shale in Canada. On distance education and open learning she follows the general western idea that there is little difference between the two and comments (page 363) 'China's RTVUs were now moving from the practice of distance education to open and distance learning'. On the other hand, I have always felt that the difference between distance education and open learning was a legal one, with the legal relationship of the student to the institution being central. In open learning the student has a legal relationship to the institution like that of any other enrolled students but because of the openness of the programme the student is given more flexibility in study and attendance than other students. In distance education the legal relationship of the student is with an institution that will grant the degree but which the student may never visit, or at which – like in Milton Keynes, Hagen or Futuroscope – there is little for students to do were they to visit.

Finally, Wei traces the evolution of the *Dianda* system in the 1980s, 1990s and the 2000s with the same meticulous attention to detail that she has shown in the rest of the book, tracing the changes occurring in the RTVUs and OUUK on an almost annual basis.

This is a major book. It is a major book in three fields: distance education, comparative education and the history of education in the UK and China. The book is written throughout in competent, smooth-flowing English and is remarkable for the citations of British and Chinese government documentation. It can be obtained from the Yilin Press, 1 Hunan Road, Nanjing, 40009 China.

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