

Learning from Shanghai: Lessons on achieving educational success, by Charlene Tan, Dordrecht, Springer, 2013, 245 pp., £90.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-981-4021-86-9

This book belongs to the series *Education in the Asia-Pacific Region: Issues, concerns and prospects*, initiated by the Asia-Pacific Educational Research Association. The series aims to offer a thorough and in-depth analysis of the current reforms and developments in education in the region of East Asia. Ten books in this series have been published so far.

Learning from Shanghai: Lessons on achieving educational success contributes to the series from the perspective of explaining the Shanghai District performance within the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Shanghai achieved an impressive performance within PISA by emerging top among 65 participating countries and economies in all three categories. Through a systematic investigation of the educational policies and practices in Shanghai, Tan's book explores the reasons for Shanghai's success and offers an extended discussion on the implications for other societies.

The author is an associate professor at the National Institute of Education, Nanyang Technological University. Her personal experience within the Singapore setting helps to explain her interest in the success of the Shanghai District. She is therefore able to confront the issues of school practices from the perspective of an 'outsider' who is nevertheless informed from within about the importance of Chinese traditions and culture for policy.

The author undertook a systematic investigation of Shanghai educational policies and practices through literature review, interviews, questionnaires, and fieldwork. She interviewed 27 school principals, 29 vice-principals, 33 teachers, and 20 students distributed across 58 schools from 12 districts, as well as 3 district education officers. Tan's findings are presented in three parts. The first part introduces the key stakeholders in Shanghai's educational practices. In this section, readers are introduced to the open-minded principals, the committed teachers, the intelligent students, and the dedicated parents. Although they all struggle in finding a balance between quality education and examination achievements, they share and strive for one common goal, 'to allow every child to move toward success with sufficient nurturing and hard work'. The second part of the book focuses on the reforms and the policies in Shanghai, with an emphasis on the 'decentralised centralism' dynamics in management. These dynamics are reflected in two directions: first, the central municipal level initiates education plans, with the districts and schools having the autonomy to form specific strategies; second, education reform in Shanghai tends to introduce innovative teaching to promote quality education, while the examination remains central in determining teaching and learning quality. The 'decentralised centralism' dynamics form as a result of the cultural beliefs and assumptions at work in China. Although they cause some tensions, they actually deliver innovations and improve Shanghai's education, reflected in curriculum changes, dialogue-style teaching, collaborative teaching, and other practices discussed in the third part of the book.

One point that the author emphasizes throughout the book is that education reform in Shanghai has learnt from the western experience, but in a critical way based on Chinese cultural beliefs and assumptions. Principals and teachers have a clear sense of what should be reformed and what should be retained. They use the dialogue-style teaching approach to encourage students' independent thinking, they reform the examinations to be more practice-oriented, and they give schools more autonomy to experiment with school-based curriculum design. However, they insist on the high-stake examination in order to protect education equality, they tend to encourage student-centred learning with teacher-dominant discipline, and they make the most of teacher collaboration as a teaching-research group to reflect and continuously improve teaching quality. It is this critical and selective borrowing that ensures Shanghai's success, and it is also the

most important lesson that other societies can learn from Shanghai. Shanghai is a good example of incorporating the global experience into local contexts, and allowing both to thrive in the combination of international strengths with the national tradition. Owing to Tan's intriguing and creative approach to researching educational policies from such a broad perspective, *Learning from Shanghai* is an informative and enjoyable read. Undoubtedly, policymakers, researchers, and education practitioners would find the plentiful and vivid resources in this book, such as teaching outlines, examination samples, and interesting on-site pictures, a valuable asset for any future research projects.

As the author concludes, 'Shanghai has indeed achieved much and showed the world what other Chinese cities may be able to achieve in the future, but that's not all that Shanghai is capable of.' As the investigation of the China experience is only just beginning, this book is recommended as a worthwhile exploration of the experience on the frontier of education reform, whether in Shanghai or in other parts of China.

Jin Jin
Institute of Education, University of London, UK
jjin@ioe.ac.uk