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Book Review – China's Radio & TV Universities and the British Open University: A Comparative Study

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Book Review

China's Radio & TV Universities and the British Open University: A Comparative Study

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As an experienced administrator of distance learning, I found myself drawn to this book by its title, *China's Radio & TV Universities and the British Open University: A Comparative Study*. Although I was quite familiar with the British Open University (OU), and I had heard of China's Radio & Television Universities (RTVUs), I wondered why the names of these two apparently disparate institutions would appear in a book title, much less be the object of a comparative study. What was the author's purpose? What did one institution have to do with the other? And what could I learn from this book that would help me improve my professional practice?

The book's author, Wei Runfang, said that she wrote this book to answer the following question, "How can distance education, the invention of the western developed countries, work within different political, economic, social and cultural contexts" (p.1). This book addresses the question by examining the similarities and differences between the OU and China's RTVUs within the political, economic, and cultural context of each country. In the introduction to her book, Runfang hopes that the study will help others who are attempting to transplant distance education from western developed countries and that it will contribute to the development of distance education theory.

I found the most interesting aspect of this book to be its international perspective on distance education. Chapter 1 begins with a whirlwind tour of the global practice of distance education by outlining its development in Europe, the Americas, Asia, Oceania, and Africa. This international perspective sets the stage for the remaining chapters by taking readers outside their country-specific perspectives of distance education to view distance education issues and practices on a global scale with the accompanying political, economic, and cultural diversity that entails. Chapter 1 concludes with an overview of four widely recognized definitions and theories of distance education: Charles Wedemeyer's theory of independent study, Borje Holmberg's theory of guided didactic conversation, Michael Moore's theory of autonomy and distance, and Otto Peters' theory of industrialization of teaching. The author points out that these theorists are practitioners and researchers working in western developed countries (Wedemeyer and Moore in

the United States, Homberg in Sweden, and Peters in Germany) and therefore their theories "might be based on and be constrained within their personal experiences of the teaching and research in the context of developed countries." She then suggests that "the future evolution and development of distance education theory might need a more global perspective" (p. 32). These comments intrigued me. I wondered what aspects of distance education theory might need to change to accommodate a "global perspective" and what a global perspective would look like.

Following the overview, the book includes four chapters comparing the OU and RTVUs in terms of their establishment, structure, and teaching and learning models. These chapters present the core content of the book including an explanation of the link between the establishment of the OU in 1969 and the establishment of the RTVUs in 1979. The author explains that while on a trip to China in early 1977, former British Prime Minister Heath (1970-1974) described the OU model to Chinese leader Deng Xiaoping. The ensuing conversations provided the impetus for establishing the RTVUs in China (p. 45).

On the whole the author does a credible job of tracing the trends in each country that led to the establishment and development of the OU and RTVUs. This book presents a detailed account of how each institution came into being and was influenced along the way by political, economic, technological, and cultural factors and trends. In Great Britain these trends included the rise of adult education, the growth in educational broadcasting, and the desire for egalitarianism in education (p.47). In China the RTVUs were primarily driven by the urgent need for nation building. Therefore, the RTVUs were structured around serving the needs of the country rather than the needs of the individual (p. 62). Those who want or need to find out the details about the establishment and development of the OU and/or the RTVUs within the cultural traditions of each country will find them here.

The book of nearly 400 pages is packed with information and could be a difficult read were it not for several features aiding the reader. These features include a section listing over four pages of abbreviations and acronyms, concise chapter summaries, and a well-developed index. As a result, readers with specific information needs on a topic large or small will be able to satisfy that need quickly.

I will conclude by saying that for me, the value in reading this book lies mainly in the international perspective it provides. Before reading this book, I had not thought of distance education as embodying the cultural concepts of western developed countries. I suppose I had naively thought of distance education as culturally neutral. However, through this study the author has shown that western concepts such as learner autonomy, independence, and individualism are very much a part of the theory and practice of distance education and that they do not easily transplant to eastern countries. While I would like to have learned more about how distance education theory and practice might be altered by a global perspective, I was pleased that this book provided me with new questions to ponder.

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