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The uncertain *Changshi*: Historical evolution of *Changshi* courses in elementary schools in China's mainland

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Abstract

In addition to its relevance to the history of education, the study of changes in curriculum design also provides insights into changes in educational attitudes. This paper examines the historical evolution of the *Changshi* curriculum in China's mainland, explains the concept of *Changshi* and its different understandings in *Changshi* or general knowledge courses, and then applies the concept to the narration and classification of history. It also includes a brief discussion on related issues.

Keywords

Changshi, *Changshi* course, education history, general knowledge course

1. Introduction

According to the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, which is now considered the standard interpretation of Chinese words, *Changshi* refers to general knowledge (CASS, 2014: 148). In reality, however, the meaning of *Changshi* is quite revealing. What exactly is *Changshi*? Different people may have different understandings of the term. There are also more background factors involved in determining what kind of *Changshi* is appropriate for different age groups.

In English, *Changshi* could be translated into 'general knowledge', 'elementary knowledge' or 'common sense', but there are clear distinctions among those terms. In particular, when *Changshi* becomes the name of a course in school education, its meaning is even more complex. By briefly reviewing the evolution of the *Changshi* curriculum in elementary schools during the Republic of China era and after the founding of the People's Republic of China, this paper seeks to find possible reasons for this evolution and the problems it presents.

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Because of the complexity of *Changshi* and, to some extent, uncertainty regarding the concept of *Changshi*, when people refer to the history of *Changshi* education, there is also a degree of uncertainty about the subject. For example, people who study the history of *Changshi* education in China's elementary schools will start from the very distant past; they will extensively discuss *Changshi* education in the Qin and Han periods (Tian, 1996). This reflects one type of understanding of *Changshi* that also covers courses that are not directly named after the term.

Even after the creation of *Changshi* courses in the 20th century, when people discuss *Changshi* education or *Changshi* teaching, they could still be referring to courses other than those explicitly named *Changshi*. For example, the *Classical Readings from the Textbooks of the Republic of China Era: Changshi* (Zhang, 2017), a special book series published by The Commercial Press in 2017, contains excerpts from several textbooks that are classified as *Changshi* but not explicitly named *Changshi*, such as the *Latest Chinese Language Textbook*, the *New Chinese Language Textbook*, the *Republic Textbook Series: New Chinese*, the *Updated Changshi Textbook*, the *Nature Textbook of the New Era*, the *Mandarin Changshi Textbook*, the *Updated Nature Textbook* and the *Nanyang Changshi Textbook*.

The curriculum is an important means for achieving the goals of education; it is the primary basis for organising educational activities and is the platform for presenting and expressing educational ideas. It is therefore at the heart of education. In addition to its relevance to the history of education, the study of changes in curriculum design also provides insights into changes in educational attitudes. This paper focuses on the evolution of courses that are named *Changshi*, while taking into account courses that are not named but are normally regarded as being *Changshi*. In this sense, the subjects for study in this paper could be divided into three categories: courses that are named *Changshi; Changshi* courses with a particular focus, such as natural or linguistic *Changshi*; and courses that are not named but are normally regarded as being *Changshi* or are closely related to *Changshi* courses. The second and third categories could be termed *Changshi*-related courses. Our discussion focuses largely on the first category.

2. The establishment of *Changshi*: The *Changshi* curriculum for elementary schools before 1949

From a historical perspective, in the late Qing Dynasty (early 20th century), China launched the 'Westernization Movement' and started to learn from the West. New forms of elementary schools were introduced, and the modern school system was established, leading to significant changes in the curriculum and teaching materials for elementary schools. In 1904, the Qing government published official documents on the implementation of the modern school system, including the *Government-Sanctioned Regulations on Junior Elementary Schools* and the *Government-Sanctioned Regulations on Senior Elementary Schools*, which specified the subjects to be taught in elementary schools, the content of the curriculum and the required number of teaching hours per week.

According to the regulations on junior elementary schools, the compulsory courses in the curriculum for junior elementary schools included Cultivation of Moral Character, Classic Confucius Teachings, Chinese Language (or Chinese Literature), Arithmetic, History, Geography, Geometry and Gymnastics, and the optional courses included only Drawing and Handicraft. In the curriculum for senior elementary schools, Drawing was added to the compulsory courses, and Agriculture and Commerce were added to the optional courses (Zhou, 2018). The development of these new educational guidelines was inspired by the education systems of other countries, especially Japan, including the subject titles, teaching hours and the tiered teaching plan. This is perhaps why *Changshi* was not included in the curriculum.

Several years later, the 1911 Revolution changed China's political system and abolished the courses on Confucius classics in elementary schools. At the end of 1912, the Government of the Republic of China published the 'Teaching code and curriculum of elementary schools', which included Science in the curriculum for senior elementary schools and

stated that the purpose of the science subjects was to enable children to learn about nature and natural phenomena and to appreciate their interrelationships and their relevance to life, while at the same time practising the skills of observation and fostering a loving heart for nature (Anonymous, 1912). This was an important turning point.

In 1922, as required by the government, a 7-year system was introduced for elementary schools, of which the first 4 years were junior elementary and the last 3 years were senior elementary. In 1924, in the *Outline of Curriculum Standards under the New School System*, the courses in the elementary school curriculum were prescribed as Chinese, Arithmetic, Health, Civics, History, Geography (the four subjects of Health, Civics, History and Geography were merged into one single subject—Society—in the curriculum for junior elementary schools), Nature, Horticulture, Technical Arts, Figurative Arts, Music and Physical Education. The outline also noted that, for the convenience of teaching, rural elementary schools were permitted to merge the subjects as appropriate if they could not be taught separately to better promote the knowledge to the students (CNEC, 1924).

On the advertising page of the *Outline of Curriculum Standards under the New School System*, the publisher also included an advertisement for the textbooks for elementary schools under the new school system reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education, which included eight textbooks and eight teachers' books with the name *Changshi*. In other words, the *Changshi* courses were launched not because of government regulations, but as a result of a forward-looking experiment on textbooks conducted by a publishing house. In the section on the original reason for compiling this teaching material, the editor wrote:

> The elementary school curriculum under the new school system is highly complex, and the sudden restructuring of schools has made it difficult to organize teaching. By combining Society and Nature into *Changshi*, the students only need to carry one book, and teacher–student interaction also becomes more convenient. Compared to the new social and natural science curriculum, this combined course provides only more contents, not less, which makes the textbook the most suitable teaching material for schools in China's mainland. (Fan, 1923)

To our knowledge, this was the first time that a textbook was formally and independently named *Changshi*. In the same year, Zhonghua Book Company also published eight volumes of *New Elementary School Textbooks: Changshi* (Lv and Ma, 1923).

Such a motivation, which originated from the unofficial publishing sector, also started to influence the official sector. In the introductory section of the 'Provisional standards for elementary school curriculum' published by the Ministry of Education in 1929, it was specifically noted that 'most experts agreed that in junior elementary schools, Society and Nature courses can be combined into one single course—*Changshi*' (Anonymous, 1931). Although the name of the course was not initially specified, in the introductory section of the *Outline of Curriculum Standards for Elementary Schools* published in 1932, the Ministry of Education stated in more explicit terms that 'the courses of elementary schools may be divided and combined as appropriate according to local circumstances . . . Society, Nature and Health shall be combined into one course by the name *Changshi*' (Zhong, 1934: 368). This was the first time that *Changshi* was officially and explicitly taken by the government to be a legitimate course in elementary schools.

To meet the requirements of a more complete curriculum, a legal status for a course is only the first step: it is also necessary to standardize the course content. In 1936, the Ministry of Education finally issued the *Curriculum Standards for the Changshi Course in Elementary Schools*, which was later revised several times. The government also published the *Curriculum Standards for the Changshi Course in Junior Elementary Schools* in 1941 and the *Curriculum Standards for the Changshi Course in Lower and Middle Grades of Elementary Schools* in 1948 (Institute of Curriculum and Teaching Materials, 2001). However, in accordance with those provisions, in the higher grades of elementary schools, a nature course rather than *Changshi* was taught to the students. Accordingly, during this period, various publishing houses published different versions of

Changshi textbooks to meet the varied needs of different schools. This could also be seen as a kind of competition in the publishing industry.

However, in addition to courses explicitly named *Changshi*, there were also a number of textbooks on the subject of *Changshi* during this period, such as *The Elementary School Textbook on Mandarin Changshi* published by Zhengzhong Book Company in 1947 and *The Mandarin Changshi Textbook of Junior Elementary Schools* published by The Commercial Press. Those books were 'edited in accordance with the curriculum standards of primary schools for Mandarin and *Changshi* published by the Ministry of Education . . . combining *Changshi* and Mandarin, with the *Changshi* textbook as the basis and the Mandarin textbook as the supplement' (Wu, 1947). This tradition can even be traced back to the early years of the Republic of China period.

It could also be noted that, during the war of resistance against Japanese aggression, in the anti-Japanese strongholds controlled by the Communist Party of China, *Changshi* textbooks for elementary schools with distinctive Communist ideological content had also been edited and published by the relevant institutions, such as the Education Department of the Government of the Jin–Cha–Lu–Yu Region and the Office of the Ji–Tai Joint Education Division.

3. The continuation, transformation and disappearance of *Changshi*: The *Changshi* curriculum for primary schools after 1949

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Government introduced a new model of education management. At the first national conference on education held by the Ministry of Education at the end of 1949, a clear plan was set out to formulate the curriculum standards for elementary schools based on the good experiences of the new education model and some of the useful experiences from the old education system, especially the advanced experience of educational development in the Soviet Union.

In 1950, the Department of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education issued the *Preliminary Draft of the Provisional Regulations for Primary Schools*:

> With the aim of cultivating children with an initial revolutionary ideal, basic academic knowledge and a healthy body and mind so that they can become people who will protect the motherland and build a new democratic society, five courses, namely Mandarin, Arithmetic, Singing and Dancing, Art, and Labor Skills, shall be taught in the first and second grades of elementary schools; seven courses, namely Mandarin, Arithmetic, *Changshi*, Physical Education, Music, Art, and Labor Skills, shall be taught in the third and fourth grades. (Department of Primary Education of the Ministry of Education, 1950)

Among the 10 courses taught in the fifth and sixth grades, there was no *Changshi* course, but there was a course called Political *Changshi*.

It was against such a background that, in 1951, the People's Education Press, which was established in 1950, published *Changshi for Junior Elementary Schools* (Shanghai Temporary Textbook Editing and Review Committee, 1951), which was a set of teaching materials compiled based on the 1949 edition published by Shanghai United Publishing House. The new version already contained topics such as admiration for Chairman Mao.

During this period, because of the transition from the old to the new system, elementary school education was still at a stage in which the 5-year school system and the 4-year (junior) plus 2-year (senior) school system coexisted. In response to this situation, the Ministry of Education issued, in 1952 and 1954, respectively, the 'Draft provisional regulations for elementary schools' for the 5-year school system and the 'Draft teaching plan for elementary schools (4+2 system)'.

The 1952 document stipulated that:

> In the first, second and third school years, a *Changshi* course will not be arranged, and the teachers should include the natural, social and other *Changshi* knowledge in the teaching and extracurricular activities of language and other courses. The health *Changshi* knowledge should be included in the Nature course of

> the fourth and fifth school years. (Ministry of Education, 1952: 727)

The 1954 document prescribed that:

> No *Changshi* course shall be arranged in junior elementary schools. History, geography, nature, health, and other *Changshi* knowledge shall be included in the Chinese reading classes and taught randomly in other courses as well. (Ministry of Education, 1954)

From then on, although courses carrying the name *Changshi* alone disappeared completely from the official documents on the school curriculum, at least as late as 1965, the Shandong People's Publishing House was still reprinting the textbook *Changshi (Trial Edition)*, edited and published by the People's Education Press in 1961. As many as 585,000 copies were printed for one of its editions, which shows that a *Changshi* course was still being taught in some local elementary schools. It is said that this is because:

> After the launch of the Nature textbook for senior elementary schools in 1957, some localities complained that the textbook was 'too demanding and sophisticated, and both the teachers and students felt over-stressed'. So, later on, general knowledge courses on nature, history, geography, moral codes and other social sciences were combined into one single course under the name *Changshi*. (Xie, 2008)

This set of teaching materials was used by experimental classes in various provinces.

During the 'Cultural Revolution', there were also *Changshi* textbooks being compiled and published in different localities, such as the elementary school textbooks of Beijing (*Changshi* volumes 1–4 edited by the Textbook Editing Team of the Beijing Municipal Education Bureau and published by Beijing People's Publishing House between 1972 and 1973), *Guangxi* (*Changshi* volumes 1–6 edited by the Elementary and Secondary School Textbook Compilation Team of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and published by Guangxi People's Publishing House in 1972) and *Tianjin* (*Changshi* volumes 1–4 edited by the Tianjin Elementary and Secondary School Teaching and Research Office in 1975) (Xie, 2008).

The compilation of local textbooks continued until 1978. For example, the *Changshi* textbook of Beijing was still being reprinted in 1978. To our knowledge, no *Changshi* textbook has been published after 1979. *Changshi* textbooks in this period were also full of quotations from Chairman Mao, or regarding topics such as class struggle, the glorification of the 'Cultural Revolution', criticism of Lin Biao and Confucius, and other topics closely related to the mainstream ideology of the time. However, due to a lack of studies on the history of this particular period, the relationship between the background of the application of these textbooks and the set-up of the official curriculum, as well as the teaching of *Changshi* courses in elementary schools, have yet to be revealed. Nonetheless, judging from the fact that textbooks were still being published, it is clear that the teaching of *Changshi* courses was quite common at the time.

In subsequent stages, courses on different types of *Changshi* have been retained in different forms. For example, in 1960, Shanghai issued the *Draft Proposal on the Reform of the Nature Changshi Course in Full-time Elementary Schools* (ECNU, 1960). In 1963, the Ministry of Education issued the *Draft Teaching Plan for Full-time Elementary Schools*, which introduced the Production *Changshi* course in the sixth grade (Compilation Committee of the Education Archive of Qinzhou City, 2000). In the *Draft Teaching Plan for Full-time Six-year Urban Elementary Schools* and the *Draft Teaching Plan for Full-time Six-year Rural Elementary Schools*, issued in 1984, *Changshi* courses on nature, geography, history and agriculture were added to the curriculum (Tian, 1996). Similar courses were also offered in secondary schools. Because of the publication of the *Syllabus for Nature Changshi Courses in Full-time Ten-year Elementary Schools (Trial)* in 1977, Nature became the most notable among these *Changshi*-related courses. Of course, such courses were already quite different from the course that carried the name *Changshi* alone.

In 2001, in a new round of curriculum reform, the Ministry of Education issued the *Outline of the Curriculum Reform of Basic Education (Trial)*, approved by the State Council, which stipulates that:

> Education in the primary school stage shall be based on general courses. The courses for lower grades shall include Morality and Life, Chinese, Mathematics,

> Physical Education and Art (or Music, Fine Art); the courses for middle and higher grades shall include Morality and Life, Chinese, Mathematics, Science, Foreign Language, General Practice, Physical Education and Art (or Music, Fine Art). (Ministry of Education, 2001)

Through those national regulations, the curriculum for primary schools was unified across the country, and *Changshi* courses finally disappeared. However, although *Changshi* courses disappeared in China's mainland, it is interesting to note that, in Hong Kong, following the recommendation of the *Education Commission Report No. 4, Changshi* was first introduced into the curriculum for local elementary courses in 1996 and became a key component of the school curriculum. In 2011, the detailed *Guidelines for Changshi Courses in Elementary Schools (Elementary 1 to Elementary 6)* was launched, followed by a revised version in 2017, which required all elementary schools to promote *Changshi* courses.

According to the guidelines, the aim of the curriculum is to help students to achieve the following goals:

> Maintain a healthy personal development and become confident, rational and responsible citizens; recognize their roles and responsibilities in the family and society, and care for the common good; develop a sense of national identity and a commitment to contribute to the country and the world; develop an interest and curiosity in the world of nature and technology, and understand the impact of scientific and technological developments on the society; and care for and preserve the environment and live a green life. (Curriculum Development Council, 2017)

Moreover, the guidelines required *Changshi* education to be linked with STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) in assessments. Thus, we can say that, at least in a partial sense, the *Changshi* curriculum still exists and continues to develop in Chinese elementary schools.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In this paper, we have provided an overview of the historical process from the emergence to the disappearance of the *Changshi* curriculum in China's mainland. Due to limitations of space, we have been unable to conduct an analysis of the standards of *Changshi* courses at various stages or of the content of typical teaching materials. Those issues will be discussed in a separate paper in the future. In this paper, we can, however, discuss the following important issues related to this part of history.

4.1 What is Changshi*?*

In the introductory section of this paper, we explained the distinctions between three types of *Changshi* course. In fact, there are big differences among those three types of course, and those differences involve both an understanding of the concept of *Changshi* and an understanding of the differences among the courses classified as *Changshi*.

The author of the book *The History of Changshi Education in China's Elementary Schools* observed that:

> The connotation and scope of *Changshi* are difficult to define, highly changeable and wide-ranging. This is attributed mainly to the differences in people's understanding of *Changshi* itself . . . *Changshi*, in our view, is some of the most basic and essential knowledge about nature, human society, and mankind itself . . . *Changshi* is also a relatively stable concept. No matter how developed the society is and how advanced science and technology are, in any given era, *Changshi* always refers to the knowledge that is proportionate to the development of productive forces of that particular time and place and necessary for a 'modern man' to possess. (Tian, 1996: 1)

In principle, there are no significant problems with those statements, but the author appears to have confused the *Changshi* course with the concept of *Changshi* as it is commonly known.

When *Changshi* textbooks were published, even before the government stipulated a requirement for such publication, the *Teacher's Book of Changshi Course under the New School System* explained in the section 'What is *Changshi*?' that because the *Outline of Curriculum Standards under the New School System* noted that rural elementary schools

are permitted to merge courses in appropriate ways if they cannot be taught separately:

> Schools in the mainland have a great deal of latitude in designing the curriculum. Many educators argue that theoretically there is a natural link between social and natural topics, so in this book, Society and Nature are combined into one single course—*Changshi*. In this sense, the term *Changshi* referred to in the name of this book is slightly different from what is usually known. *Changshi* in the common sense refers to all knowledge other than specialized knowledge, while *Changshi* in this book is limited to the scope of Society and Nature; the content of this book only covers a part of what is commonly known as *Changshi*. (Ji and Wei, 1925: 1)

It can be seen that, in terms of its origin, the purpose of the *Changshi* course is to combine Society and Nature into one single course for convenience of teaching. Moreover, *Changshi* in this context is not completely equivalent to the more broadly defined concept of *Changshi* as used in daily language. Due to the development of and changes in society, people's understanding of the *Changshi* concept as used in daily language has also changed. Naturally, such changes are reflected in the contents of *Changshi* courses. However, in the first kind of courses that are named *Changshi*, the combination of Society (the name of this course has varied in different periods) and Nature still represents the overwhelming majority. For example, Health is sometimes included in *Changshi* courses, but sometimes it is taught separately. As for the second kind of courses, the term *Changshi* simply means elementary or basic knowledge. In the third category—courses that are not named *Changshi* but are still considered to belong to or be closely related to *Changshi*—there is no direct mention of *Changshi*, but the understanding of the concept is similar to that of the second category.

However, there is one special case; that is, during a specific period of time, the relationship between Mandarin and *Changshi* in Mandarin *Changshi* textbooks is more subtle. After all, *Changshi* needs to be expressed in language; if the students are able to learn *Changshi* while learning language, that will achieve two desired outcomes at the same time. Because of this, these textbooks are often classified into the *Changshi* category. That said, some people have long noted the differences between Mandarin and specialized *Changshi* teaching.

4.2 *Problems in* Changshi *education*

The creation of *Changshi* courses, in addition to its emphasis on elementary and basic knowledge, also carries the implied meaning of general education and interdisciplinary synthesis. The disappearance of *Changshi* courses and further classification of sub-courses reflect people's emphasis on specialized knowledge and their neglect of general knowledge education. For example, in the *Outline of the Curriculum Reform of Basic Education (Trial)*, published in 2001, the curriculum for junior high school comprises both Science, a comprehensive course, and sub-courses such as Physics, Chemistry and Biology, and encourages the opening of comprehensive courses in all regions. Yet the reality now is that only one province continues to provide a comprehensive Science course. Furthermore, this is only within the realm of science and is far from addressing the interdisciplinary issues between the sciences and humanities.

Although there is now a new concept called STEM or STEAM (including Art) education, and people are paying more attention to this in the field of science education, careful examination reveals that its focus is still on science, which is a long way from a concept of general knowledge that puts equal emphasis on the sciences and humanities. One exception is the newly established *Changshi* curriculum in Hong Kong, which includes six categories for teaching (Health and Life; Humans and the Environment; Science and Technology in Daily Life; Society and Citizenship; National Identity and Chinese Culture; and Understanding the World and Learning about the Information Age), as well as the requirements of STEM education. To some extent, this returns to the original purpose of *Changshi* courses and incorporates a more up-to-date educational philosophy: the development of basic academic knowledge, general skills and positive values and attitudes.

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