

Opportunities for Consumer Education in China

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This paper reviews the current situation of consumer education and identifies opportunities for consumer education in China. Interactions and exchanges with consumer educators and researchers from the U. S. and other countries to promote consumer education in China are also discussed. The intent of this paper is to stimulate discussion of this topic among consumer educators and researchers in the U. S., China, and other countries, which may, hopefully, result in cooperative educational or research projects.

Current Situation and Opportunities

Consumer education in China is fragmentary and non-formal. The following describes current consumer education in China. Since needed systematic data are not available, discussions are based on anecdotal evidence. Opportunities for consumer educators and researchers are also discussed.

Consumer Education at Chinese Universities

Current situation. There are no formal consumer economics or consumer education curricula at Chinese universities, but two types of institutions have potential to develop consumer economics education. Among the first type are economics departments at major Chinese universities. In these departments, consumption economics is taught, a new field proposed by Professor Yin Shijie since the economic reform began in 1978. Under the leadership of Yin and other economics professors, consumption economics has become a major field in mainstream economics in China (Xiao, 1997). Consumption economics is different from consumer economics in the western world. It is more like macroeconomics in the U. S. addressing economic issues at the macro-level. However, its focus is consumption. Consumer rights and protection also are discussed in consumption economics articles and textbooks in China.

Among the second type are re-emerged colleges and universities that include home economics. Currently, only Hwa Nan Women's College in Fuzhou and Ginling Women's College in Nanjing, exist (Davis, 1994; Yin & Xiao, 1997). Both of these are private colleges. Home economics as an academic discipline existed at many Chinese universities until the Communist Party took power in 1949. Because

of economic reform and open-door policies that resulted in the 1985 educational reforms in China, private schools were allowed to open. Many majors needed by society are offered by this kind of college. The above-mentioned colleges now have programs in foods and nutrition, childhood education, clothing and design, tourism, and English. Because some of their heads and faculty members were trained in U. S. universities with a home economics tradition, these private colleges can be potential hosts for consumer economics and education programs. In summer, 1996, Ginling Women's College hosted a workshop titled "Home Economics Development and Networking with China." The workshop brought nearly 70 participants from seven Chinese provinces and four participants from other countries. Workshop participants agreed to (a) plan such workshops for the future, (b) become a "liaison networking group" to pursue development of home economics as a profession, and (c) draft a request to the national government for permission to establish a national Chinese Home Economics Association. Two provincial associations have already formed, and teacher training for thousands of schools is being discussed (M. L. Davis, personal communication, November 29, 1996).

Opportunity. Consumer education can be formalized and expanded at university levels in China. There is a need to collect data to identify the number and type of departments or universities that have potential to offer consumer education courses. The starting point can be universities and colleges that teach consumption economics and home economics courses. One immediate possibility is to offer consumer economics courses for college students as part of general education requirements. In the rapidly changing situation in China, a consumer economics course will benefit students and prepare them for being competent consumers. Secondly, consumer economics programs may be developed at some interested and qualified universities and colleges to train students as professional consumer educators for various social settings. Finally, consumer economists at universities could play a critical role in research of issues relevant to consumer education in pre-college and adult education institutions.

Non-formal Consumer Education Provided by Consumer Associations

Current situation. Consumers have a right to gain knowledge of consumption and consumer protection as specified in Article 13, the Consumer Protection Law of China that took effect in January 1994. China has an umbrella-type of government consumer protection agencies named consumer associations. China Consumer

Association in Beijing, headquarters of Chinese consumer associations, has conducted numerous consumer education activities (China Consumer Association, 1991). Activities included distributing educational materials, publishing books and newspapers, working with television and radio stations or newspapers and magazines to offer special programs and columns, sponsoring best consumer news contests, publishing educational articles, and offering consultation services to individual consumers.

Consumer associations at lower levels have conducted a variety of consumer education activities as well. For example, a city consumer association in Fujian province has sponsored general and focused educational programs (Li, 1995). General educational activities included working with the city radio station to offer a special program, "Voice of Consumers," to provide consumer knowledge, holding exhibits in public displaying tips on how to protect consumers and how to identify fake and inferior consumer goods, and distributing free consumer educational materials, such as consumer newspapers, on special occasions like March 15, International Consumer Rights Day. Focused educational activities included seminars at large working units to teach consumer knowledge, special training classes of consumer laws for department heads of factories and stores, and special educational activities at kindergartens, elementary, middle, and high schools to provide consumer information.

Audiences of educational activities provided by consumer associations include the general public, families, workers, peasants, and students at pre-college levels. Coverage of consumer education includes (a) knowledge of consumer goods and services, (b) consumer protection laws and procedures, and (c) consumption value. It is very interesting to compare coverage of consumer education in the U.S. with that in China. Consumer education in the U.S. usually includes (a) consumer decision-making, (b) economics, (c) personal finance, and (d) consumer rights and responsibilities (Scott, 1990).

An obvious difference in terms of content coverage between the two countries is that Chinese consumer education emphasizes consumption value. Consumers are in a transition from an old command economy to a new market economy. Their consumption value is also moving from a traditional value to a modern one. Chinese consumer educators are debating and struggling to define appropriate consumption values for modern Chinese consumers that can be taught in consumer education courses.

Opportunity. Many consumer associations at various levels have done a lot of work in consumer education. Successful experiences should be summarized and promoted to other consumer

associations. Consumer researchers at universities could provide leadership to help consumer associations collect data for a data base or clearinghouse for the promotion of consumer education.

Consumer Education in Pre-college Education Institutions

Current situation. In 1990, the National Coalition for Consumer Education in the U.S. surveyed the chief state school administrators to gather data on the status of consumer education in pre-college educational institutions. Thirty states and the District of Columbia have statewide consumer education policies for schools, but variations exist as to whether the subject is optional or mandatory and how concepts are presented (Scott, 1990). Compared with the U.S., consumer education in pre-college levels in China is much less developed. Currently, consumer education in pre-college educational institutions is offered mainly in conjunction with consumer associations. Following are some examples (Yin, 1996).

-- In Dafeng, Jiangshu, consumer education is incorporated in the curricula at various levels, ranging from kindergartens to elementary and middle schools. A textbook for consumer education has been published for student use.

-- In Liaoyang, Liaoning, the county consumer association has worked with schools to offer consumer education courses.

-- In Zhuhai, Guangdong, Golden Coast Middle School has offered a two-semester curriculum in consumer education that helps students learn consumer knowledge through a variety of activities.

Even though examples of consumer education are numerous, there is not a system of consumer education in China. Consumer education is not required by law. Many consumer education activities are conducted with the help of local consumer associations as part of their outreach efforts. It is uncommon for schools to take initiative to offer consumer education courses or curricula.

In the U. S., consumer education courses are offered in several ways. Content can be offered as a separate course, content can be integrated into an existing subject or several existing subjects, and content can be integrated in a capstone course (which taps expertise of teachers in existing subjects for a separate consumer education course in the final year of high school). The last type is more realistic and effective and recommended by consumer education experts (Bannister, 1996). In developing China's consumer education curriculum, the U.S. experience can be used as a reference.

Opportunity. There is great potential in offering consumer education courses or curricula in kindergarten, elementary and middle schools

(in China, middle schools include junior high and high schools). Consumer educators and researchers at universities may collect data to identify appropriate examples and explore the possibility of incorporating successful activities from the examples into the formal educational system. They also may work with schoolteachers to develop textbooks and curricula that are suitable for students in elementary and middle schools.

International Exchanges and Interactions

Opportunities for consumer education in China identified in the previous section can be used not only by Chinese consumer educators and researchers but also their counterparts in the U.S. and other countries. Consumer educators and researchers outside China can support consumer education in China in several ways. They can donate textbooks and educational materials to Chinese universities, and they can help Chinese educators and researchers seek financial support in developing consumer education and research programs (Widdows, Hong, Xiao, Higa, Tso, & Malroux, 1995). Since each country's laws and teaching approaches are different, textbooks and educational materials from other countries can be used only as models or references to inspire Chinese consumer educators to develop their own textbooks and other teaching materials. Another way for consumer educators in the U.S. to help develop consumer education in China is to work with interested universities and colleges, high schools if possible, to offer special classes teaching consumer economics in English. On Chinese campuses, English classes are very popular; students are eager to learn and master English. Working with Chinese consumer educators, U. S. consumer educators can incorporate English language, consumer knowledge, and American culture into consumer economics courses.

Interactions and exchanges among consumer economists in China and other countries will benefit all parties involved. Thorelli (1988) outlined a definition of international research and methodologies in consumer policies, many of which can also be used for consumer education program development and related research projects. Through exchanges and interactions, consumer educators and researchers from the U. S., China, and other countries may jointly develop theories and methods in consumer education, conduct comparative research relevant to consumer education, publish consumer education textbooks and other materials, share consumer education experiences, and develop global or inter-nation interface projects in consumer education. Only through interactions and

exchanges will the involved parties find a broader bundle of possible solutions for current issues in consumer education that benefits both themselves and others.

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