

## Chapter 48

# Collective Transformation of Three Generations of Chinese Adult Learners in K–20 Education

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### ABSTRACT

*Drawing on the theory of transformational learning, its critique by other scholars, and the transformational experiences of three generations of Chinese adult learners, this chapter proposes an extension of transformational learning theory: external forces may lead to collective transformation and emancipation in addition to individual transformation and emancipation (Marx, 1890/1929). This research will formulate the basics needed to transform a society, which are critical thinking skills, a leader-membership exchange and the transformative connection, and lastly, the fusion of collective identity, social movements, and political actions. The research will use these basics to highlight the Chinese journey in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. During the Great Leap Forward and the Great Cultural Revolution when political objectives took precedence over educational ones, adult learners were collectively and massively transformed in the same direction at the same pace on the same scale. While these collective transformations had devastating effects on China's education system, in the Post-Mao era when science and technology dominate China's academic world, positive expressions of collective transformation and emancipation are possible.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Transformative learning encompasses one's training. It is defined as the transformation of one's meaning perspectives through a process of construing and appropriating new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience as a guide to awareness, feeling and action (Jarvis, 2002, p. 188). Since its formal introduction into the adult education field in the early 1990s, the theory of transformative learning has been widely critiqued and analyzed from a variety of perspectives. For example, Will McWhinney, editor of *Journal of Transformative Education*, observes the following about the theory of transformative learning:

*In particular, I find that whereas the mourning phase has traditionally been a personal trauma, today the pain arises from social disadvantages, and whereas adult learning was primarily focused on cognitive and political aspects as Jack Mezirow emphasized, they are now recognized to call for response to social emotional concerns (McWhinney, 2004, pp. 171-172).*

Similarly, King (2004) argued that individual transformation and emancipation also may occur when the "trigger event" is external and originates "outside of the individual's ability to impact them and the larger society" (King, p. 312). Because Mezirow was primarily concerned with personal transformation, that is the emancipatory (self-knowledge and self-reflection), other scholars such as McWhinney (2004) and King (2004) points out that socioemotional concerns and the external environments greatly affect individual transformation and emancipation. The sum of individual transformation and emancipation should lead to collective transformation and emancipation in Marx's terms (1890/1929). Although Freire's (1970) emancipation and transformation is all about changes in society, transformation and emancipation, this chapter deals with how adult learners use critical reflection to make sense or meaning of their own experiences. Critical reflection

is necessary as a feedback piece for the adult to analyze and possibly adjust the transformation, in order to make the transformation rise to its full potential. If transformation denotes change from stage to another, emancipation indicates a state where adult learners are in a position to exercise intellectual freedom to change the way they prefer. Without transformation, emancipation would not be possible. According to Cranton (1994, 2006), change can take place in both directions (p. 81). King (2004) further states that transformative learning research and theory have moved in several directions (p. 309). Above all, Mezirow's theory of transformative learning is applied beyond the traditional focus of individual critical self-reflection.

Other scholars such as Collard and Law (1989) criticize Mezirow's theory for emphasizing individual transformation and for failing to acknowledge the "social environment in which structural inequalities are entrenched" (p. 105). In a recent article, Boxler (2004) also criticizes Mezirow's theory for its individualism — that is, the theory's focus on a set of individual skills and processes to teach.

One source of this focus on the individual may be reflection, a key concept in transformative learning theory as articulated by Mezirow (1991, 2000). Mezirow identified three types of reflection: content reflection (i.e., an examination of the content or description of a problem), process reflection (i.e., checking on the problem-solving strategies), and premise reflection (i.e., questioning the problem). None of Mezirow's three types of reflection entertains the possibility that external forces may lead to *collective* transformation and emancipation of adult learners in a given social environment. Although Mezirow did address "systemic" critical reflection in his theory of transformative learning which concerns examining sociocultural distortions, his chief concern was personal transformation (Cranton, 1994, 2006). Collective transformation does mean changes in society as opposed to Mezirow's perspective change. In addition, Freire's (1970) concept of "critical reflection" was all about changes in

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