Chapter 9
Constructing the Knowledge Society: China's Experience

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ABSTRACT

Since the Reform and Opening up in the late 1970s, China has been seeking an innovation-driven knowledge society. In the past decade, the central government and local governments took effective measures to quicken China's steps towards a knowledge society. In the recent 18th National Congress of the CPC, reform and innovation was highly emphasized to give fresh impetus to knowledge society building. Within the context of increasing globalization and Africa-China long-lasting friendship and cooperation, China and African countries can learn from each other in knowledge society construction. As the second largest economy in the world, China is playing an increasing role in knowledge society construction in Africa. Can Africa learn from China's experiences? This chapter provides some answers to this query.

INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of knowledge society was popularized by Peter Druker(1969) in the 1960s and 1970s, the practice of this concept without using the exact term in China has a long history. China is well known historically for employing science and technology in daily life and production activities. Science in China was well elaborated on in Needham(1956). A case in point is the Four Great Inventions (paper making, compass, gunpowder, and typography) which the ancient Chinese gifted to human kind. Since the establishment of New China in 1949, China has been exploring a suitable way to positive economic and social evolution. After several failures and setbacks, China has gradually found way elaborated socio-economic with Chinese characteristics, and

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continuously makes adjustments according to the fast changing domestic and external situations. This chapter deals with China's experiences in social and economic transformation from a backward country into the second largest economy in the world, in which knowledge society has played, and is playing an important and constructive role. The authors maintain that China's Opening up and reform policy, the central government's policy on science and education, investment in scientific research activities, as well as the opportunities offered by modern Information and communication technologies (ICTs), account for the great achievements in building China's knowledge society. Given the gap between developing and the developed countries, the future challenges and the exponential growth of knowledge itself globally, China still has a long way to go in pursuing the moving target of knowledge society. China is essentially a developing country like the majority of African nations. This means they face common or similar opportunities and challenges in an innovation and knowledge-driven world. China's experiences may be used by African countries as a useful point of reference. China and African countries can learn from each other regarding knowledge production, sharing rich local knowledge, and preserving cultural diversity. In the context of growing economic globalization and long-standing China-Africa friendship and cooperation, China can also make direct contributions to knowledge society construction in Africa through infrastructure construction, human resource aid, capacity building, and new ICTs investments. In fact, some Chinese enterprises are very active in the above-mentioned areas. Their contributions make Chinese input in Africa's knowledge society building more and more important.

ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY IN CHINA

The concept of "Knowledge society" was born in the 1960s or 1970s (Drucker, 1969). American economist, political scientist, sociologist and management expert Peter Drucker (1969) pointed out that the knowledge society is one in which knowledge is the key resource. That is to say, the essence of knowledge society is that knowledge elements dominate economic and social development. Compared with industrial society, the principal feature of the knowledge society is that knowledge and talent, which replace natural resources, mechanical equipments and other tangible capital, become the decisive factors for economic and social development, and the most critical resource for wealth creation. In the knowledge society, the knowledge economy dominates the economic sphere; innovation turns into the major driving force for development and is the core element of competitiveness.

China has gone through a tortuous process in engaging knowledge, intellectuals, and building its knowledge society. Since the founding of New China, the leaders of CPC (Chinese Communist Party), such as Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, Deng Xiaoping, have attached importance to the role of intellectuals in the economic construction, and spoken about it many times in their speeches. Mao stressed: "Our country is an underdeveloped country in the field of culture, so we cannot construct our country without intellectuals"(Mao, 1999, p.270). Deng Xiaoping argued that China should strengthen educational undertakings in ethnic minority regions, unite intellectuals outside the CPC, and improve wages and living conditions of teachers, engineers, doctors and other professionals (Deng, 1994).