

Achievements and Limitations of Research on the CPC's Higher Education During the Yan'an Period

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Abstract

The Communist Party of China's (CPC) higher education during the Yan'an period is a hot topic in academic research. Based on a review of selected existing research on this topic, this paper summarizes the basic research trends. The author further argues that although existing research portrays vividly the state of higher education during the Yan'an period and has paved the way for more in-depth future research, it has a number of limitations in research perspective, content, and methodology, which suggest directions for subsequent research accordingly.

Key words: Yan'an period; Higher education; Achievements of research; Limitations of research

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education in China can be traced back to the group of westernized new colleges founded by the government of Qin dynasty at the end of the 19th century. Since then, all subsequent administrations, be it the interim government of Nanjing founded by Sun Yat-Sen, the Kuomintang (KMT) government, or the Communist Party of China (CPC) border region government and the government of new China, have all laid much stress on the development of higher education. Their efforts, as part

of the historical heritage of China, have made lasting and multifaceted impacts on higher education in contemporary China through certain ideological and cultural forces. Compared with other governments, the CPC's philosophy and practice of higher education have shaped to a greater extent the essence and basic structure of higher education in contemporary China. Therefore, in order to resolve the various predicaments in the development of higher education in present-day China or to further explore directions for future development, we can't afford to not view higher education from a longitudinal perspective and identify its inherent pattern of development from its roots.

Long before the CPC was formally founded, with the introduction of Marxism into China, a group of Marxist educators such as Yang Xianjiang and Qian Yishi already started to engage in education: they were compiling theoretical works on education while participating in the revolution. In 1921, Mao Zedong and He Shuheng founded the first CPC cadre training college in Changsha, Hunan Province, which served as the formal prelude to the CPC's higher education.

In 1935, the Central Committee of the CPC arrived in Yan'an along with Central Red Army after the Long March and eventually decided to settle in this impoverished mountainous area of northwest China. Subsequently, on this land shrouded in yellow dust, the CPC developed economy and promoted culture in accordance with local circumstances and eventually determined the future of China. This legendary period of time from October 19th, 1935 to March 23rd, 1948 is referred to as "the Yan'an Period", which has become a hot topic in subsequent research. The Yan'an period is also an important period that witnessed major development in the CPC's higher education: Colleges that were shut down during the revolution were reopened here one after another; in addition, a number of new colleges and universities were also established. Twenty-nine of these schools were fairly influential and representative at that time, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1
Institutions of Higher Learning During the Yan'an Period

Name of institution	Person(s) in charge	Location	Time founded
Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC	Dong Biwu, Li Weihan, Deng Fa, Peng Zhen	Xiaogouping	November 1935
Anti-Japanese Military and Political University	Lin Biao	Yan'an	June 1936
University of Marxism-Leninism	Zhang Wentian	Lanjiaping	May 1938
Shanbei Public School	Cheng Fangwu	Yangjiawan	October 1937
Academy of Natural Sciences	Xu Teli, Chen Kangbai	Majiawan	May 1937
Luxun Academy of Arts	Sha Kefu, Zhao Yimin	Qiao'ergou	April 1938
Women's University of China	Wang Ming	Wangjiaping	July 1939
Yan'an University	Wu Yuzhang, Zhou Yang	Huashibian	September 1941
The Eighth Route Army Healthcare School	Wang Bin	Zhangcunyi of Fu County	August 1937
China Medical University	Wang Bin, Shi Shuhan	Liushudian	September 1940
The Eighth Route Army Military and Political College	Wang Jianxiang	Dabiangou	January 1940
Military Academy	Zhu De, Xu Xiangqian	Dabiangou	December 1941
Administration College	Lin Boqu, Wang Ziyi	Huashibian	July 1940
Yan'an Telecommunications College	Wu Zeguang, Wang Zheng	Xichuankou	January 1937
Zedong School for Young Cadres	Chen Yun, Feng Wenbin	Dabiangou	May 1940
Northwest Party School	Bai Yaoming, Zhang Bangying, Xi Zhongxun	Qilipu	April 1942
Military College of Arts	Mo Wenhua	Qiao'ergou	April 1941
Yan'an School of Workers	Zhang Hao	Qiao'ergou	May 1939
Border Region Agricultural School	Zhu Kaiquan	Hongsigou	July 1939
New Text Cadre School	Wu Yuzhang	Qingliangshan	May 1941
Academy of Nationalities	Gao Gang, Gao Kelin	Dabiangou	September 1941
Border Region Cadre School of Arts	Ke Zhongping	Beigoucun	May 1942
Border Region Vocational School	Huo Zile, Wang Yinpu	Nanguan	June 1942
Russian Language School	Zeng Yongquan	Dingquanbian	August 1942
Artillery School	Guo Huaruo, Zhu Rui	Taobaoyu	December 1944
Anwubao Youth Training Course	Feng Wenbin	Anwubao of Yunyang	October 1937
Yan'an Pharmaceutical School	Li Weizhen	Yaodian	September 1942
Japanese Worker and Peasant School	Lin Zhe, Zhao'anbo	Baotashan	May 1941
Korean Revolutionary Military and Political School	Jin Baiyuan, Piao Yiyu	Luojiaping	February, 1945

Note. Source: Yan'an Revolutionary Memorial Hall.

Generally speaking, after nearly 13 years of fairly steady developments in Yan'an, the CPC's philosophy and model of higher education gradually reached maturity and started to spread around due to the CPC's political and military victories. "Education at that time was most backward and inadequate in terms of educational resources, personnel, and scope, but it was also indigenous and most creative. The series of educational philosophies and practices that emerged during this period has made a deep and lasting impact on education in the New China; it to some extent shaped the essence and structure of education in post-1949 China and has in turn influenced the way of thinking, knowledge structure, and behavioral choice of several generations" (Li, 2011).

1. TRENDS OF RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE YAN'AN PERIOD

Due to its outstanding historical significance, higher education during the Yan'an period has always been a focal point of research for Chinese scholars. Using "Yan'an period", "higher education", and various combinations of similar concepts, the author conducted a comprehensive

search in China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI) academic journals, VIP database for Chinese Technical Periodicals, Wanfang databases, Web of Science and other similar academic databases. Based on analysis of the data, the trends of existing research on higher education during the Yan'an period are identified as follows:

1.1 Overall, the Volume of Research Has Been Increasing, and Most of This Body of Research Has Been Presented in the Form of Research Papers

As documented in the databases mentioned in Figure 1, the first research paper about higher education during the Yan'an period appeared in 1938 in *the Liberation Journal*. It was titled *Experience Gained and Lessons Learned from the Implementation of National Defense Education at Shanbei Public School*, written by Shao Shiping. But according to Figure 1, although research on this topic started early, the total number of research papers published during the period of 1938-2000 was only 94; this number rose exponentially to 185 after the turn of the century. In other words, the volume of research published over the past 14 years was almost twice as much as that of the previous 60 years. On a yearly basis specifically,

2011 and 2012 witnessed the blowout in research on higher education during the Yan'an period: The number of doctoral dissertations and high-quality master's theses added up to 13 in these two years and the number of journal articles totaled as much as 48, which accounted for nearly one third of the total number of research articles published in the past 14 years.

However, in terms of the distribution of such research across different categories, the increase of research in research.

this area largely depended on the increase of journal articles as well as theses and dissertations. Monographs and conference proceedings did not contribute much to the growth of this body of research. Not only that, there was an obvious decrease in the number of monographs. The data above suggest that higher education during the Yan'an period is becoming a hot area of research, but the fairly clustered categories of research reveal the relative lack of serialized, systematic

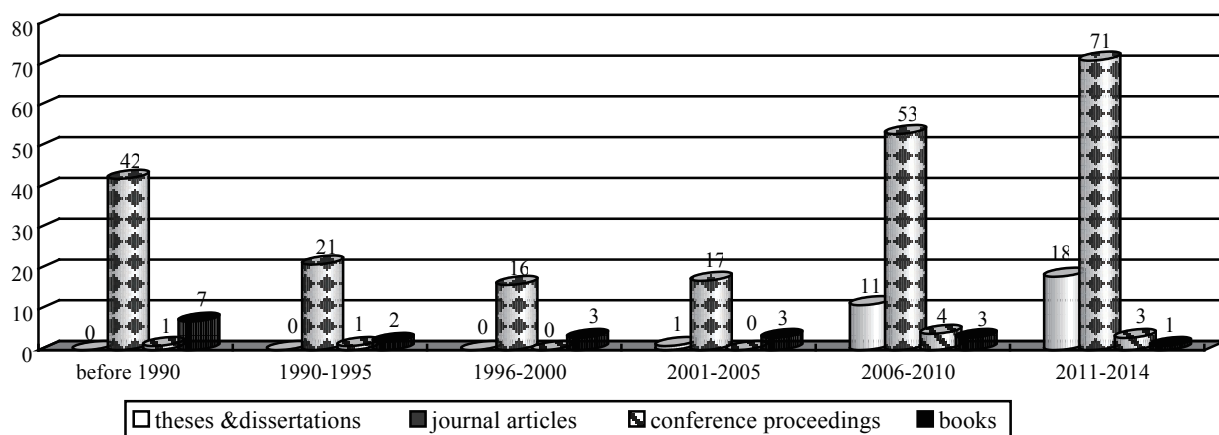


Figure 1
Bar Graph of Volume of Research Distributed in Five-Year Intervals

Note. Data is collected up to December 31st, 2014. The same cut-off date applies to all subsequent analyses.

1.2 Researchers Come From Diverse Disciplinary Backgrounds and Have Formed Research Groups

Take theses and dissertations as an example. During the

subsequent 11 years following the presentation of the first documented thesis in 2003, a total number of 30 relevant theses and dissertations were presented, whose authors came from seven different first-level disciplinary majors.

Table 2
Disciplinary Background of Authors of Theses and Dissertations¹

Major	Education	Marxist theories	History	Arts	Chinese language and literature	Philosophy	Political science	Total ¹
Number of papers	9	6	3	4	1	1	4	28
Percentage	32	21	11	14	4	4	14	100

However, as shown in Table 2, although the authors of these theses and dissertations came from a wide range of disciplinary backgrounds, authors majoring in education and Marxist theories were the largest group and ranked first in percentage. Under “education”, six of the papers were written by education history majors while under “Marxist theories”, all six papers in this category were written by ideological and political education majors. This to some extent suggests an inclination toward clustering of research in second-level disciplines.

By contrast, journal articles and conference proceedings have achieved a higher level of diversity

in terms of the disciplinary background of the author, representing a wide range of first-level disciplines including but not limited to philosophy, education, ethnology, sociology and arts. However, a focused look at the research papers published in recent years and, more specifically, during the blowout period of 2011 and 2012, reveals that in terms of both content of the paper and the disciplinary background of the author, the categories of “Marxist theories” and “political science” account for nearly one-third of the total.

In addition, a research group based at Yan'an University has published a number of influential academic papers over the past 14 years on the topic of ideological and political education in colleges and universities during the Yan'an period such as *Ideological Education in Colleges and Universities during the Yan'an Period and Its Implications* (Liu & Du, 2007), *Postgraduate Cadre School Education in the Shan-Gan-Ning Border*

¹ Disciplines are categorized according to “The Directory of Disciplines and Majors in Doctoral, Master’s, and Postgraduate programs” (December 2005 Amended and Revised Edition) jointly issued by The Academic Degrees Committee of the State Council and The State Education Commission in China.

Regions: Centering on Yan'an University (Liang, 2007), and *Prioritizing Conduct, Putting Learning into Practice: The Spirit and Philosophy of Yan'an University during the New-Democratic Revolution* (Zeng, 2012).

Scholars like Peng Minquan, Pang Haiyin, and Wang Lihong focused on the development and reform of Luxun Academy of Arts and published in succession a number of high-quality academic papers that analyze music, literature, and fine arts education as well as educational system construction and educational value orientation. Some examples include *An Exploratory Study of the Educational System in the Music Department of Yan'an Luxun Academy of Arts* (Wei, 2008), *Yan'an Luxun Academy of Arts: A New Model for Literature and Art Education in China* (Pang, 2009), *A Study of the Political Factors in Music Education at Yan'an Luxun Academy of Arts* (Wang, 2010), *On the Implementation of Mao Zedong's Philosophy of Literature and Art Serving the*

Masses and Serving the Advancement of Socialism in the Fine Arts Department at Luxun Academy of Arts (Min, 2013), and *Organization of the Literature Department in Colleges and Universities during the Yan'an Period and the New Literature Tradition* (Peng & Chen, 2014). It can be said that research on literature and art education in colleges and universities during the Yan'an period has coalesced into a multi-center collaborative effort.

1.3 The Scope of Research Displays a Tendency Toward Homogenization

1.3.1 In Terms of Content, Research Mostly Focused on Ideological and Political Education

Based on the classification of the research theme of education history by some Taiwanese scholars and scholars from the Normal University², the theme of research in theses and dissertations is roughly distributed as follows:

Table 3
Distribution of Research Theme in Theses and Dissertations

Category of content	Laws, policies, and systems	Education figures	Comparative education	Issues in education	Educational institutions	Various kinds of education	General sketch and discussion	Total
Number of papers	1	6	2	12	3	4	2	30
Percentage	3	20	7	40	10	13	7	100

The theme of research in journal articles published during the blowout period of 2011-2012 is roughly distributed as follows:

Table 4
Distribution of Research Theme in Journal Articles

Category of content	Laws, policies, and systems	Education figures	Comparative education	Issues in education	Educational institutions	General sketch and discussion	Various kinds of education	School history	Total
Number of papers	1	6	0	9	10	1	6	15	48
Percentage	2	12	0	19	21	2	13	31	100

As shown in Table 3, thesis and dissertation research focused on issues in education while Table 4 reveals a similar trend except for the addition of the memoir-type of research on school history.

Specifically, research under “issues in education” almost exclusively focused on the issue of ideological and political education, which is in the realm of “moral education”. In addition, some of the research under “education figure” and “educational institutions” also touched on “moral education” such as *On the Fundamental Connotation and Practical Implication of Wu Yuzhang's Philosophy of Moral Education in Colleges and Universities* (Pan, 2012) and *The Historical Context of Luxun Academy of Arts: A Literature Sample of the CPC's Ideology* (Chen, 2012).

The most important top-down ideological rectification movement in the history of the CPC occurred during

the Yan'an period; institutions of higher learning were both the home and the target of this movement. “After September 1941, Yan'an started to examine in a systematic manner the experience gained and the lessons learned in education over the past few years”.

In 1942, Yan'an's education underwent another significant transformation... accompanying the rectification movement that started this spring, theorists and educators at Yan'an devoted major efforts to the elimination of the influence of “doctrinarism” and “subjectivism” in the field of education; these efforts eventually culminated in the complete formation of “new democratic education under the banner of Maoism” (Gao, 1999).

It can be said that due to the constant changes in the party as well as in the domestic and international situation, “moral education”, which has sustained the attention of Chinese educators throughout the history of China, was again brought to the foreground during the Yan'an period; the distribution of the focus of thesis and dissertation research is precisely a direct reflection of this phenomenon. The data summarized in Tables 3 and 4 are not only consistent with the researchers' disciplinary backgrounds (Marxist theories, political science) but also

² See the classification scheme presented by Chen Kengren, Zhang Yuxian, Kang Hanwen, and Zhang Huilan, authors of Chapter Four “History Research” in *Approaches to Education Research: Concept and Application* edited by Pan Huiling (East China Normal University, 2005)

suggest indirectly the fact that even researchers from other disciplinary backgrounds cannot evade the characteristics of Yan'an education that were specific to that time in history.

1.3.2 In terms of the Phases of Development of Higher Education at Yan'an, Most Research Was Conducted on a Macro Level Focusing on the Overall Development of Higher Education as a Whole

The Yan'an period is an eventful historical period that spans thirteen years, including the eight years of the war of resistance against Japanese aggression. Higher education in the liberated areas during the eight years of the anti-Japanese war alone is divided into three phases by Professor Qu Shiwei at Peking University in his book titled *A History of the Development of Education in Chinese Colleges and Universities: Great Development (July 1937-1941), Great Readjustment (1942-1943), and Great Improvement (1944-September 1945)*, each emphasizing a different aspect of the development of higher education. For instance, during the phases of the Great Readjustment and the Great Improvement,

the previous phase of the Great Readjustment emphasized ideological readjustment and development. In this phase (note in the original: the phase of the Great Improvement), in order to adapt to the new situation, colleges and schools made necessary adjustments. Each school developed specific guidelines in accordance with the nature of the school and its tasks and made significant system and curricular changes, thereby greatly improving higher education. The transformation of Yan'an University is tangible evidence of this improvement. (Qu, 2006, p.297)

In other words, the development of higher education during the Yan'an period was characterized by both continuity and gradual, sequential transformation. However, very few research papers, be it these and dissertations or journal articles and conference proceedings, analyze the individual phases of development; most research summarizes the overall development of higher education during the thirteen years. Further, even the few papers that do analyze the individual phases of development such as *A Discussion on the Rectification Movement at Yan'an Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC* (Chen, 2014) mostly focus on the phase of the Great Readjustment (the Rectification Movement) and rarely offer in-depth research on other phases.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF RESEARCH ON HIGHER EDUCATION DURING THE YAN'AN PERIOD

2.3 Overall Achievement of Research

2.3.2 The Large Body of Research on the Topic Offers Vivid Descriptions of Higher Education During the Yan'an Period

In terms of the types and depth of research, the outcome of research on higher education during the Yan'an period

falls into two distinct categories. Research papers in one of the categories more or less display the characteristics of memoirs. Many of the authors of these papers were themselves participants (mostly students) in higher education during the Yan'an period. They were trained in various institutions of higher learning during the Yan'an period, and they experienced in a direct and authentic manner ideological and political education as well as group living of teachers and students. Major institutions of higher learning portrayed in journal articles in this category include Shanbe Public School, Anti-Japanese Military and Political University, and Luxun Academy of Arts. In addition, Women's University of China, Academy of Natural Sciences, Academy of Nationalities, and the Party School of the Central Committee of the CPC were also mentioned briefly. Moreover, the alumni associations and the editorial office of university archives have also published memoirs and non-fiction books about institutions of higher learning during this historical period such as *A Memoir on Yan'an Luxun Academy of Arts* (1992) and *A Record of the Eventful Years at Women's University of China* (Jiang & Xue, 2007).

These texts not only provide rich historical records for retrospection on and understanding of history so that future generations would have an opportunity to comprehensively integrate various aspects of higher education during the Yan'an period; more importantly, they add a dose of the individual to a collective history.

2.1.2 Some Basic Concepts Have Been Clarified, Which Paves the Way for Subsequent Research

Besides the more sentimental experiential approach discussed above, the other category of research places more emphasis on theory. Under "education figures", this type of research offers focused analyses of the "differences within sameness" philosophy of higher education advocated by Cheng Fangwu, Wu Yuzhang, Xu Teli and others and its practical functions. Research under "educational institutions" analyzes the characteristics of various types of education such as ethnic education, vocational education, women's education, and military education in educational philosophy, guidelines, school spirit, administrative organization, curricular design, and textbook selection. Under "issues in education", although ideological and political education is a prominent theme, a few of the research papers such as *Physical Education Activities at Yan'an Women's University of China* (Yang, 1985) also touch on physical education, fine arts education, and other types of education. In addition, some of the research papers under "general sketch" such as *Higher Education in the Liberated Areas During the Anti-Japanese War* by Professor Qu Shiwei and *On the Characteristics and Status of Higher Education in the Anti-Japanese Democratic Base Areas* by Shen Suigai, a Master's degree holder, have also laid the foundation

for a rational understanding of the characteristics of the development of education during this historical period.

Further, all of the research in the theoretical category discussed above also points out that as wartime education, higher education during the Yan'an period fundamentally differed from higher education in the KMT controlled areas and from western higher education in educational philosophy, implementation procedure, and administrative organization. These differences are demonstrated in the following characteristics of higher education at Yan'an: an emphasis on the connection between theory and practice, the implementation of the principle of "smaller quantity, higher quality", adherence to the integration of education and productive labor, and close attention to ideological and political education (Qu, 2006, pp.322-324). These characteristics were developed to facilitate adaptation to the unique social environment of Yan'an, and they in turn contributed to the CPC's achievement of its final victory.

2.4 Major Limitations of Research

2.2.1 Research Perspectives Lack Diversity, and Research Is Not Relevant to the Contemporary Context

Due to the unique characteristics of higher education during the Yan'an period and the disciplinary background of the researchers, the homogenization of research topics has become a fairly serious problem. As shown in Tables 3 and 4, there is a significant lack of research on the topic of "laws, policies, and systems", which happens to be a focal point of academic research in recent years. According to the data collected from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure website, research papers with titles relevant to "system of higher education" alone amount to 1,805, and the number of papers with titles concerning "university system" adds up to 36,909. In terms of time of presentation, since 1966, the earliest year of documented research, the volume of research on systems of higher education or university systems has been continuously increasing and started to grow exponentially since 2010 approximately.

The burgeoning of research on systems is closely related to the development of the understanding of the academic discipline of education in China. Many scholars have realized that only by establishing modern systems of higher education can we eradicate the many problems that we face currently in the development of higher education. The reform of the system of higher education in China during the new period was added to the agenda in 1984. In May 2010, the "Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)" issued by the State Council also explicitly mentioned again the "improvement of the modern university system with Chinese characteristics".

Yet, concurrently, many scholars also realize that the reform of the system of higher education in a country won't succeed by simply replicating the practice of

other countries. For example, at the beginning of the 20th century, when the United States drew on the educational system of German universities as a model, it made a conscious effort to adapt it to the existing educational system, tradition, and culture. "The adjustment of the German model at American universities was well aligned with the local circumstances of the United States" (Altbach, 2001, p.32).

When learning from other countries' effort toward reform of higher education, the United States did not blindly replicate existing practices but selected what was most suitable and adapted it to its own context with an emphasis on the integration of a wide range of values and ideologies. (Tang & Fang, 2002, p. 47)

Accordingly, in order for us to succeed in our effort to improve the system of higher education in China and to break away from the current predicaments, we need to not only learn and benefit from the experience of other countries but also take into consideration the unique characteristics of the political and economic systems of China. More importantly, we should not deviate from the existing track of the historical evolution of our own system of higher education.

However, existing research lacks such awareness of the connection between historical research and future development.

2.2.2 Research Tends to Focus on One Single Aspect of Education

In 1921, in *General Education and Vocational Education: A Speech at the Welcome Ceremony at the Singapore Chinese High School and Other Schools*, Cai Yuanpei pointed out that in order to help students develop a healthy personality, general education must rely on four types of education: physical education, intellectual education, moral education, and art education" (Cai, 2011, p.128). In 1927, Mao Zedong also explicated stated in "On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People" that "our educational guideline should foster the learner's development in three aspects of education: moral, intellectual, and physical". Subsequently, additions to existing educational guidelines are always based on preservation of the three types of education mentioned by Mao Zedong.

However, Tables 3 and 4 suggest that in terms of the theme of research alone, too much emphasis is placed on "moral education". The importance and uniqueness of ideological and political education during the Yan'an period cannot be denied, yet higher education must also include other components. However, research concerning other types of education is indeed lacking. This tendency toward homogenization on the one hand would lead to the misconception that higher education during the Yan'an period was primarily (or even exclusively) ideological and political education; on the other, it may easily obscure educational achievements in other areas and in turn give

rise to some kind of prejudice when educators today try to draw lessons from the achievements in higher education during the Yan'an period.

Moreover, the tendency toward general sketches of the overall development of higher education during the Yan'an period also suggests the need for more specific and in-depth research that provides accurate details.

2.2.3 Research Methodologies Lack Specificity, Accuracy, and Diversity

Research in this area can be classified as historical research in the category of qualitative research. In recent years, with the deepening of people's understanding, research methodologies have also been undergoing constant development, transformation and integration. In other words, on the one hand, many scholars have realized that on a macro level qualitative research and quantitative research each have their own advantages and disadvantages and are trying to find a way to integrate them; on the other, even within the qualitative paradigm, various relevant theories and methods also blend into one another.

However, the existing pool of research papers especially journal articles use relatively simple methodologies. A review of the entire sample of journal articles reveals an absence of papers that use the comparative method and the behavioral method as the main research methodology (two of the theses/dissertations use primarily the comparative method); of the 93 journal articles published in the past 5 years (2009-2014), only one article uses primarily the case study methodology. In other words, research so far leans heavily toward the use of traditional methodologies in educational research such as literature review, historiography, and observation and has not made adequate and creative use of other methodologies.

CONCLUSION

The importance of education is self-evident. The fundamental purpose of research on the history of education is to effectively bridge the past and the present, thereby identifying directions for the future development of the human society. Hence, delving into the history of education is an endless pursuit. Existing research on the CPC's higher education during the Yan'an period has provided for subsequent researchers rich historical records and a basic foundation for a rational understanding of the topic, yet it also has major limitations in research perspective, methodology, and content. The value of subsequent research lies precisely in constant supplement and enrichment based on recognition of these limitations.

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