Appendix 7

Why I Chose Shenzhen

Cheng Hongbing

Recently, my phone was ringing non-stop with friends in the field of education calling to ask me: “Do you really plan to go to Shenzhen? Why do you want to run a school there?”

Though I explained my decision carefully, these conversations almost all ended the same way: “I admire your courage, but I am afraid I am not as brave as you are.” I smiled without further comment, because I had heard people talking about me going to Shenzhen for the high salary. The local newspaper in Shenzhen had even gone so far as to publish an article with the eye-catching headline: “New School President Appointed with One Million Annual Salary.” This, then, is perhaps as good a time as any to enumerate my reasons for going to Shenzhen.

In May 1994, when I was 33 years old, I went to work at Shanghai Jianping Middle School (上海建平中学). It has since been 20 years, yet I remain a teacher. I started as a Chinese language teacher, then served as a middle-level cadre, later as an executive vice principal, and finally as the school’s principal. After that, I held the post of the Dean of the Institute for Educational Development, and then Deputy Director of the Education Bureau.

I missed the days when I was teaching in the classroom, however, and I missed my days working directly with a school, a position in which I had spent nearly 30 years.

It was in this mindset that, around February or March 2013, I received a phone call from a well-known head-hunting company. They described a position as the principal for a very promising school to be built in Shenzhen. Naturally, I recommended an outstanding senior principal. Though he turned down the proposal he asked me: “Aren’t you interested in this position?” I smiled and told him that that would be impossible.

I had multiple reasons for this response, so I gave it with no hesitation. The man from the head-hunting company listened to me very patiently, however, and then continued to introduce the school to me gently and persistently.

* Cheng Hongbing (程红兵), the principal of Shenzhen Mingde Experimental School, in the Yangcheng Evening News, (November 5, 2013)
Later, I went to Beijing for a workshop. This same headhunter traveled to Beijing to talk with me about education, curriculum reform, and the general state of schools, all of which were topics in which I was extremely interested. Before we knew it, we had come to a consensus on many matters. Later, the leaders of the school—the director of the Education Bureau of Futian District, Shenzhen (深圳市福田区教育局), and the founder of the Tencent Company (腾讯)—travelled to Shanghai to meet me. They also invited me to fly to Shenzhen to discuss the school's development plans with them.

This is a school with a brand new management mechanism. As a public school, it was not run solely by the government. Instead, the Education Bureau of Futian District commissioned the Education Foundation of the Tencent Company (腾讯教育基金会) to run it. It is a philanthropic project of the Tencent Company, instead of being a for-profit project. This means that the Tencent Company will inject money into the school without expectations of a profit. The Education Bureau of Futian District, the Tencent Company’s Educational Fund (腾讯教育基金会), community leaders, representatives of parents, teachers, representatives of the teachers, and the principal will together form the school board in order to implement the principal system of responsibility under the leadership of the board. They plan to try to explore a new path in basic education, similar to that of charter schools in the United States and freedom schools in Britain.

I remember that I once wrote reviews about the British freedom schools, and based on that research, we should not put too much hope in private schools nowadays to break through the country's educational impasse. There are many private schools now in China, but the majority of them are run by entrepreneurs, rather than educators. As entrepreneurs, they could not shake off the ideas of running a school for anything other than economic returns.

We cannot put our hope in key schools, either, because these schools carry too many demands for social usefulness from the parents, the government, and the community. Without exception, they are always expected to have the highest quality of education and very high entrance rates to the next level of education. These expectations are a heavy burden and function like heavy chains tying their wings tightly; they become used to the chains and have lost the ability to fly up high. They cannot tolerate the slightest mishap and can never afford the slightest so-called failure.

In the newspaper article written about me, I called on the central government to provide support to those who are willing to start freedom schools in China, which may break the deadlock currently encompassing basic education. My thoughts were strikingly similar to the original intention of starting this school proposed by the leaders of the Tencent Company and the government.