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China's Education System: Loved and Hated

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China's Education System: Loved and Hated
Mette Halskov Hansen

Introduction

At the end of China's last dynasty, Qing (1644–1911), every second or third boy, and only a tiny minority of girls, was receiving basic training in reading and writing classical texts in one of the many Confucian private schools (Rawski 1979, 23; Thøgersen 2002, 22). A hundred years and many educational reforms later China stands out as the country hosting the world's largest state education system. By 2010, government policies and state investments had resulted in an educational system that guaranteed nine years of free universal education. On top of this, many parents were willing and able to invest in further education for their sons as well as daughters, mostly within the state education system. However, the Chinese people's desire for education (Kipnis 2011) has long been accompanied by severe criticism of the form and content of Chinese schooling. High officials send their own children to American Ivy League universities, and a growing number of affluent middle-class parents are willing and able to pay for their children's education in a range of different educational institutions mainly in Western Europe, the US, and Australia. The government itself deliberates on the basic dilemma of how to promote innovation and creativity in an exam-driven school system designed to socialize youth in the spirit of political compliance. And at the same time, social status, gender, and ethnicity continue to create deep discrepancies with regard to the quality of education and children's career options.

The education system has been subjected to extensive research within China, much of it quantitative in nature, aimed at developing policy recommendations. In contrast, the aim of this chapter is to show how especially anthropological and historical research of Chinese education can offer new insights not only into the practices of Chinese education but also into broader theoretical issues concerning Chinese politics and society.

In the Chinese school, children and youth from all levels of society follow more or less the same curriculum and use the same textbooks but, at the same time, students, parents, and teachers interact with each other and interpret their respective tasks in different ways. In such a context, participant observation in and outside schools (i.e. not merely during classes) combined with in-depth interviews (which are in themselves insufficient to understand daily practices), are especially useful research methodologies for exploring Chinese society through the lens of education. Therefore, in this article the academic field of 'Chinese education' is opened up to include, even focus on, research that approaches the Chinese education system as a case for understanding larger societal and political dynamics.

The Chinese people's well-known reverence for education has roots in the historical trajectory of esteemed Confucian education and civil service exams (Elman and Woodside 1994; Lee 2000). Confucian ideals of lifelong learning and dedicated study have undoubtedly helped to shape popular notions of the elevated status of education. However, culturalist explanations are vague and inadequate to account for how Chinese state education has evolved and been received by the population, what kind of knowledge it has sought to promote, and how it became the subject of intense debate at all levels of society and in the political system. While formal education has enjoyed high prestige throughout China's history and showed remarkable signs of continuity, changing economic realities and political priorities have continuously influenced its form and content, as well as people's practices and perceptions of it.

This article begins with an outline of the development of Chinese modern education with an emphasis on the period of the People's Republic of China (PRC) since 1949. It goes on to discuss in some detail three key issues regarding the examination system, the practices of disciplining and socialization, and the new option of studying abroad. Together these topics help to highlight the connection between the 'inner life' of the Chinese education system and the broader context of society and politics in the global education market. The article ends with some reflections on the way ahead for the Chinese education system and the research of it.
Developing Modern State Education

Historical Context

To ‘have culture’ (wenhua) in China means to be educated or, more precisely, to have gained access to China's long cultural history through the study of written texts (Thøgersen 2002, 3). In the Confucian private sishu schools that existed well into the 20th century, fortunate boys would spend a few years of their lives reciting a fixed set of Confucian classics and primers and practicing the writing of characters. Those who performed best, and whose family could afford to loose a man's labor, would continue to ever higher levels of state-controlled examinations in the distant hope of becoming part of the imperial bureaucracy.

The hierarchical structure of civil examinations was based on uniform Confucian ideology and dates back to the Sui dynasty (ad 581–618). After having found its final form during the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), it remained basically unchanged for 500 years until the period of intense modernization started with the fall of the last dynasty and the beginning of the Chinese Republic (1911–1949). Western powers had disrupted Chinese imperial political structures and society during the period of the Opium Wars especially (1840–1842 and 1856–1860), and Chinese reformers now argued for the need of a thorough transformation of education in order to better resist and compete with Western countries that were more technologically advanced than China (Pepper 1996). The traditional imperial examinations were abolished in 1905 and school subjects that were completely novel to the Chinese school system, such as modern vernacular, citizenry and geography were introduced. So was the idea, borrowed from Germany and the US, that modern education should offer not only an academic but also a vocational (zhiye) track that would transmit useful technological knowledge and skills to the wider population (Schulte 2012). The modern Chinese education system as we know it today had started to take shape.

Between 1937 and 1948 China went through a turbulent period of Japanese occupation and civil war. This caused a set-back for the republican ambitions of universal modern education, and in response, traditional private Confucian schools began to mushroom again. When finally the Communist Party (CCP) with Mao Zedong as its paramount leader came to power in 1949, the new state faced the enormous task of developing a form of education that was commensurate with Party ideology and fit to develop the new PRC. As the ruling power ever since, the CCP has taken the education system on a very winding path, as we shall see.

Education During the Mao Years

From the establishment of the PRC until the beginning of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the CPP's and government's ambitions were to achieve the true basic universal education that the Guomindang leadership of the Republic had never managed to implement. Elementary school was supposed to be for everyone – boys and girls – secondary schools for a select cohort, and higher education for a limited number of specialists. In addition, a number of large-scale adult literacy campaigns were initiated.

The CCP already had some experience establishing their own schools in areas they had controlled during the height of the civil war and they had come to regard education as a very important weapon in the struggle for national survival (Thøgersen 2002, 127). After their victory in 1949, they looked to their ally, the Soviet Union, for a model of a new form of universal education. The demands for correct Communist moral and political teaching was emphasized but in general, as China scholar Stig Thøgersen (2002) notes, the tone during the first years of the PRC was pragmatic. China needed cadres, technicians, and skilled workers at all levels to get the economy running after years of war and unrest so the training of such personnel and teachers was given a very high priority (140).

Education also needed to be rebuilt and developed as a tool to secure the borders of the PRC. During the
Long March (1934–1935), the Communist leaders had promised ethnic minorities living in the vast western border regions that they would receive formal recognition as ‘ethnic minorities’ (shaoshu minzu) and enjoy a high degree of political autonomy in specially designated regions if the CCP gained power. New cadre training for ethnic minorities was therefore set up after 1949, and schools teaching minority languages in addition to Chinese were established in areas inhabited by, for instance, Tibetans, Uighur, or Dai.

Extensive transformation of a state's education system tends to reflect the authorities' more general political priorities. After the launching of the anti-right campaign in 1957 and the break with the Soviet Union, China entered a period of political radicalization that lasted until Mao's death in 1976, and this caused great changes to the education system. The famine, atrocities, and endless personal tragedies that these policies caused are well documented (see e.g. Dikötter 2010, 2016). Also with regard to education, many things went very wrong in this period, although some were probably more positive than the dominant Chinese and Western narratives about this period tend to claim. First of all, secondary education came to a halt during the high tide of 1966–1969 of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). Initially, Red Guards were encouraged by Mao to rebel against their teachers and school authorities, but in 1969 when Mao realized that things were spinning out of control, millions of urban youth were sent out of the cities to live and work as peasants in the countryside. Class background rather than school performance decided an individual's educational options, and throughout this period there was an intense emphasis on political orthodoxy in schools as in society in general. On the less acknowledged positive side, the Cultural Revolution saw a spectacular expansion of basic universal education that benefited, not least, disadvantaged girls and kids in rural areas (Thøgersen 2002, 166–67).

Another remarkable thing about the education system in the 1960s and 1970s was the extent to which it evolved in almost complete isolation from both the dominant Soviet-led socialist world and the capitalist countries that were slowly becoming interested in a higher degree of synchronization of their systems of education. China had student exchanges with foreign countries on a small scale only, and increased integration of Chinese education into the global capitalist-dominated system came only after Mao's death in 1976 and the start of Deng Xiaoping's celebrated national ‘reform and opening policy’ (gaige kaifang) from 1979.

New Elite Schools and the General Expansion of Education

The majority of the Chinese population seemed greatly relieved when the radical Gang of Four was arrested in 1976 and the new leader Deng Xiaoping started to prepare a sharp turn in economic policies towards supporting private trade and individual ownership. In spite of some skepticism about the sudden negation of Mao's experiments with expansion of rural education, most people seem to have applauded the reintroduction of a centralized college entrance exam (gaokao) in 1977, the return to a more strictly regulated education, and the reestablishment of key point schools for the best students.

The now professor of anthropology Yunxiang Yan was able to sit successfully for the newly reinstalled national entrance exam in 1978 after having received very little education during the Cultural Revolution. His personal story up to that landmark day epitomizes the fate of many urban youth during this period:

I was born in Beijing, China. In 1966, like some 200,000 other people nationwide I involuntarily became an impoverished villager when my family was expelled from the city to a remote village due to my father's political opinions. In the same year I was forced to drop out of primary school and to work as a shepherd, farmer, and seasonal manual laborer in rural China until 1978. As a young political outcast living and working in two villages during this 12-year period, I had more opportunities than many of my peers to experience the devastating economic hardships (including famine) and the brutal political oppression under radical Maoism. Regardless, I benefited a great deal from living at the...
very bottom rungs of society as I learned directly from everyday life what really matters to ordinary
people. (Yan 2016)

When, in 1977, everybody, regardless of class, age, or gender, was again allowed to take the college entrance exam, nearly 5.7 million people signed up, though less than 5 per cent of them were eventually admitted to college.5 According to the Ministry of Education, the exam at the time was considerably easier than it is today. Potential students had lost years of academic training and therefore the standard of the exams could not be very high. Moreover, there were few places in universities and colleges available for the expectant youth. Compare these figures to the 2010s. It has been 40 years since the college entrance exam was revived, and every summer since there has been intense competition among high school graduates from all over the country to get into the country's universities and colleges. The exam is difficult, but the number of universities and colleges has expanded enormously due to the post-Mao government's explicit aim of strengthening both basic compulsory schooling (nine years) and the quality and quantity of universities and colleges. In 2014, more than nine million high school graduates sat for the national college entrance exam and 74 per cent of them were admitted into an institution of higher learning.6 While they may not have made it into the college of their dreams, at least some kind of tertiary academic education was available for them.

Since the 1980s, the authorities have initiated a broad range of reforms in order to strengthen education and, at the same time, facilitate a gradual incorporation of China into the global market economy. It is, therefore, not surprising that they have sought also to adapt the education system to dominant global trends. To summarize, the government has consolidated schools locally throughout the country by moving the financial and academic responsibilities to higher levels in the administrative system. It has merged schools and made larger units, often making it necessary for students to board at schools. It has reinforced the division between vocational and mainstream education tracks, investing more in vocational training while simultaneously supporting the development of elite academic schools at all levels. Not least, it has opened up the possibilities for youth to study abroad.

During this period of globalization, the population has continued to consistently express a desire for education, undoubtedly strengthened by the one-child policy7 implemented from 1979 and only gradually reversed from 2015. Especially in urban areas, parents often project their hopes for the future onto their one child and its education (Bregnbaek 2016; Fong 2004). Even in rural areas where many families still consist of two or more children, parents have looked for creative ways of navigating a competitive education system (Kipnis 2011; Kong 2015; Murphy 2004). All over the country families have invested privately in tutors for their children, moved to areas where schools are considered to be better, used 'the back door' to get into schools, relied on boarding schools to provide better academic support for children, or saved money to send a child abroad. Chinese parents invest in education in the hope that it will secure a child's, and therefore the entire family's future, but also, and maybe even more so, because it has become the norm in Chinese society. It is what is expected of you as a parent.

In this atmosphere of what anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2011) poignantly defined as educational desire, it is easy to overlook the inherent hierarchies and social gaps that are just as much a product of the modern system of education as is the successful universalization of basic schooling. Studies analyzing China's census data from 1990 and 2010 show a clear general progress in educational attainment in rural as well as urban areas, among both Han and ethnic minorities, and for males as well as females (e.g. Parkhouse and Rong 2016). By the 2010s, China had largely (though not completely in poorer rural areas and urban migrant communities) succeeded in achieving the nine years of compulsory free education that was the purpose of the Compulsory Education Law of 1986 (e.g. Hannum, Wang, and Adams 2010; Hansen 2012; Liu et al. 2009; Murphy 2004, 2014). Furthermore, about 85 per cent of a cohort of graduates from junior high school would now at some point in their lives enroll in a vocational, regular, or adult high school.
However, studies of official data also demonstrate how persistent the gap between the genders and the rural/urban areas is. Official figures of school enrollment in the poorest areas may in fact give a somewhat exaggerated optimistic view on actual school attendance, because children are sometimes registered as pupils without actually going to school (e.g. Hansen 1999, Wellens 2010, 87–8). Yet, official figures leave no doubt that inequalities in education have been very difficult to combat in the post-Mao era. Illiteracy rates, for instance, have gone down considerably but the gender gap has increased – and this is the case in urban as well as rural areas. The gender gap ratio in illiteracy rates for the population as a whole was 2.45 in 1990 but up to 2.92 in 2010 (Parkhouse and Rong 2016, 319). Even more importantly, as seen from Table 51.1, official data demonstrate an increased inequality gap with regard to both educational attainment in rural versus urban areas and between the two genders – despite the general increase of educational attainment in all areas.

Table 51.1 Educational attainment for people (age 6 and over) by gender and education, 1996 and 2010
Table 51.1  Educational attainment for people (age 6 and over) by gender and education, 1996 and 2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1996</th>
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<th>2010</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Population(%)</td>
<td>Male(%)</td>
<td>Female(%)</td>
<td>Population(%)</td>
<td>Male(%)</td>
<td>Female(%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No schooling</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>7.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 6 years of</td>
<td>41.3</td>
<td>41.1</td>
<td>41.5</td>
<td>28.8</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>31.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schooling</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>14.6</td>
<td>17.3</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>40.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>38.1</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 9 years of</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>41.7</td>
<td>44.1</td>
<td>39.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>36.8</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>35.4</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>45.0</td>
<td>48.8</td>
<td>40.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 12 years of</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>23.6</td>
<td>26.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 3 or more</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>years of college</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City</td>
<td>21.5</td>
<td>22.5</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>20.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completion of 8 or more</td>
<td>43.1</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>36.3</td>
<td>66.2</td>
<td>70.7</td>
<td>61.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>years of schooling</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men to women ratio</td>
<td>1.37</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Table is from Parkhouse and Rong, 2016, 318. They derived the data from China’s Sixth Census Survey conducted in 2010 and from the State Statistical Bureau’s Yearbook of 1997 that was based on a 1 per cent sample of China’s population.
So far, most studies of educational hierarchies have focused on gender gaps and the persistent rural–urban divide that is still, in effect, a divide between poorer and richer areas, schools, and families. However, as anthropologist T. E. Woronov (2015) has recently shown, it also makes a world of a difference, career- as well as status-wise, whether one tests into a vocational or a regular (academic) high school; and, as several studies have shown, students from rural and low-income areas are still significantly under-represented in colleges (see, for instance, Yang et al. 2016).

In other words, education within the state school system means many different things in practice, and in the following section we shall therefore take a closer look at how the examination system constructs hierarchies of knowledge and consolidates class distinctions.

**Knowledge and Exams**

Exams form an integrated part of educational systems all over the world, but in China formalized exams have an especially long historical trajectory. The imperial examinations constituted a premodern expression of an ideal of meritocracy. The selection of officials was supposed to be based on impersonal and objectified testing of an individual’s ability to memorize and reproduce a fixed set of knowledge and skills. This, arguably, helped lay the ground for the culture of examination that shapes education in contemporary China. The practice of rote learning and emphasis on memorization has survived through all of the educational reforms of the past hundred years. During my fieldwork in a high school in a relatively affluent rural area between 2008 and 2012, I was struck by the similarities in educational methods with what I had found in much poorer ethnic minority areas in Yunnan about 15 years earlier (Hansen 1999, 2015). To be sure, the curriculum had undergone change, teachers were better trained, students in those two areas of Zhejiang and Yunnan came from very different cultural and economic backgrounds, and mobile phones and social media had created new means of communication for students and teachers in the 2000s. Nevertheless, the emphasis on rote learning, emulation of role models, and the expectation to reproduce predefined truths, all remained intact and continued to dominate pedagogical practices.

If, again, we approach education as a case to understand larger societal dynamics, it makes sense to argue, as sociologist Børge Bakken (2000) has done, that China’s practice of examination is much more than an expression of a meritocratic ideal. It is one aspect of a broader form of governing by which students (and other citizens) are taught to emulate what Bakken calls exemplary models. Rather than emphasizing critical approaches to established knowledge, students in China learn to memorize, reproduce, and imitate models, such as an accomplished teacher, a patriotic piece of art, a well-written political statement, or a Communist youth hero from the 1960s like Lei Feng, for instance.8

The form and content of examinations and tests at all levels of education help to further consolidate the practice of memorization and rote learning within the classroom. This educational trajectory is often referred to in China as *yingshi jiaoyu* (应试教育), an exam-oriented and rote-learning form of schooling. Many teachers and educators, even the government itself, have criticized this practice. Since the 1990s, the authorities have, for instance, introduced reforms to promote a less exam-focused and more reflective form of education, the so-called *suzhi jiaoyu* (素质教育) – a term which implies concern both with the form and style of teaching and with the social and moral education of youth. The intention of ‘quality-in-education’, or *suzhi jiaoyu*, is to handle in a better way the inherent dilemma of an education system that is expected to simultaneously strengthen students’ adherence to authority and encourage their ability to be reflective and innovative. In the meantime, the examination system – along with the government’s dilemma – remain in place, because too much is at stake politically and socially.
In China where corruption is widespread, the examination system, in spite of all its acknowledged flaws, is still perceived as the most objective form of selecting students. As Kipnis (2011) writes, exams are often viewed in China as the only method that produces social hierarchies that the public deems legitimate (124). And exams in China do produce social hierarchies. In her groundbreaking study of China's vocational education, Woronov (2015) shows how the exam system intentionally divides youth at an early age into two social groups: those who will successfully pass the high school entrance exam after nine years of schooling, and those who instead continue into vocational training that destine them to become low-class citizens. Other studies have long pointed to the fact that vocational schools have a low status in the hierarchical system of education, and that the approximately 45 per cent of students who continue into vocational education tend to be considered as failures, lazy, sometimes even stupid and a bad influence on other students (Hansen and Woronov 2013; Kipnis 2011; Schulte 2012; Thøgersen 1990; Woronov 2012).

However, Woronov's analysis goes deeper to demonstrate how vocational schooling in China is partly an exercise in class formation. Students in vocational schools learn to endure boredom, tolerate authority, be flexible workers, and amuse themselves with limited resources. These skills, Woronov argues, are relevant for the kinds of jobs they can expect to get after graduation, namely, low-paying urban service-sector jobs (Woronov 2015). Graduates of vocational schools will not become part of the newly minted urban middle class, but having graduated from vocational high school (sometimes college) they will also not be part of the traditional urban industrial working class.  

More research is needed to understand what it actually means to become part of the vocational education track in urban and rural areas, and what role the education system at large plays in the formation of class and social status in the Chinese socialist market economy. This also leads to the question, discussed in the following section, of how schools actually teach and socialize students to become good citizens in an authoritarian political system with a partial liberal capitalist economy.

Socialization and Discipline

How are students taught to become citizens and what can the study of education tell us regarding the status of the individual in contemporary China? The analysis of textbooks is undoubtedly one of the most important methodologies for understanding the official view on what kind of knowledge and which values should be promoted to the younger generation. Curriculum in China is largely centralized and standardized, and in spite of the possibility of occasional local adaptations, a formal system of political control ensures that all textbooks remain in line with official guidelines.

Consequently, in the subjects considered most important for providing moral and political training there is no substantial difference between textbooks in an elite school in Shanghai or a rural school in Yunnan. Courses on morality, values, and politics are taught to all students at all levels in the compulsory Chinese education system. Together with language/literature and history, they constitute the most important subjects for disseminating the official view on patriotism, the role of the Communist Party, and the rights and responsibilities of the individual in the PRC (M. H. Hansen 2015, 69). Especially the textbooks *Thought and Values*, in junior secondary school (grades 6–9), and *Thought and Politics*, for high school (grades 10–12), are, as researcher of Asian education Edward Vickers (2009a) notes, most intimately associated with official ideology, and they, therefore, also serve as benchmarks for the broader school curriculum (55).

Vickers has formulated what kind of citizens the Communist government hopes to achieve through its education system in the era of global capitalism:

*[E]ducational policymakers in China would like to be able to foster in Chinese pupils the kind of initiative, boldness and innovative spirit which they see as among the more positive outcomes of many*
Western education systems, while divorcing these attributes from the liberal-democratic ethos of the societies in which these systems have arisen. (Vickers 2009a, 65)

This ideal has prompted a number of ‘quality’ reforms intended to engage students more in their studies. Especially since the curriculum reform of 2007, new school textbooks were supposed to reflect students’ own interests more. Thus, students at the high school level now read a variety of texts ranging from Confucian classics to the *Diary of Anne Frank* to a study of McDonald's restaurants in China. Not surprisingly, however, the continuous dilemma of the neo-socialist ideal of combining capitalist economy and Leninist authoritarian governance is still directly reflected in textbooks.

In my fieldwork in a Zhejiang rural high school, for instance, there were endless examples of how textbooks and teachers put forward more open-ended questions for students to discuss. But at the same time, they also made sure that the final ‘correct answer’ was always readily available in case discussions moved in the ‘wrong’ direction (M. H. Hansen 2013, 2015). Students were taught that they should reflect on and discuss certain issues, but always accept that a definite final morally and politically correct answer existed. Therefore, in high schools all over the country, history is taught as a series of facts that are rarely open to interpretation, basic Confucian texts of high moral value are memorized and recited, and the correct answer to any given question is practically always available in a textbook or teacher's manual.

A study of textbooks can reveal a lot about official discourse and values. However, other research methodologies are required to understand what is being taught in schools beyond the textbook, and, not least, what students actually learn in school about themselves as individual members of the societal collective. In my study of how and to what extent the rise of the individual in post-Mao China is reflected in the education system, I found, for instance, that rural high school boarding students tended to express a very high degree of personal responsibility for any failure or success in school (M. H. Hansen 2015). They were not pleased when school authorities attempted to co-opt their student council for disciplining fellow students, and they were frustrated about their low grades and uncertain futures. But they tended to blame themselves for this. They did not criticize their parents for not helping them enough. They would fiercely criticize the education system in general for a lot of things – boredom, exerting too much pressure, limiting their freedoms – but they did not blame their own school or their teachers as such for the situation. Most agreed that the education system, including the exams, had a form and content that was necessary in such a populous country still in the process of developing economically; and they learned in school that it was the individual's obligation to make the most of it and accept the burden of the responsibility for failing to succeed.

However, much the education system is criticized in China today for not sufficiently supporting the kind of innovation and creativity that continued economic growth and China's global ambitions require, the prospect of profound change is bleak. Firstly, because the neo-socialist state, regardless of the Chinese government's desire for a more innovative education system, needs to ensure loyalty to one-party rule. Secondly, because most people continue to trust that the education system serves their family interests. At least in principle it provides a path to upward social mobility, and it offers to take care of children and govern their time within respected state institutions.

There are important cracks in this system, though, and they are widening. If the prediction is correct that only relatively superficial changes to the exams and the form/content of education will be implemented under the current political regime, there is a growing risk that the Chinese education system will lose prestige nationally, especially among those who can afford other options. Certainly, a growing number of Chinese middle-class parents are now following on the heels of the political and financial elite by supporting their children's study abroad, some of the consequences of which will be discussed in the following section.

**Alternative Paths**
For parents who are skeptical towards the Chinese education system's established pedagogical approach, there are an increasing number of private schools available in urban areas. These include ‘Chinese international schools’ that are targeting Chinese nationals mainly, but also Rudolph Steiner and Montessori schools known for their alternative teaching methods developed in Europe. The most debated, and maybe also the most attractive alternative path, is study abroad. In 2015, a historically high number of 523,700 students left China to study abroad, adding significantly to the total number of approximately four million Chinese students who have studied in foreign countries since 1978 (ICEF Monitor 2016). Why are people choosing this alternative path when the Chinese education system in general enjoys high status? Vanessa Fong’s (2011) comprehensive and long-term study of Chinese students abroad provides the following answer:

Chinese citizens in my study went abroad hoping to become part of the developed world by getting citizenship or permanent residency rights in a developed country, earning enough money from work abroad to start lucrative businesses in China, and/or earning developed world college degrees that could help them win prestigious high-paying jobs in China or a developed country. (Fong 2011, 95)

By 2010, as many as 20 per cent of Fong’s 1,365 survey respondents from the city of Dalian had studied abroad (Fong 2011, 3). Fong shows that all students, regardless of socio-economic background, wanted to go abroad and that parents went a long way to finance their child’s study abroad. Many rural students in my own studies shared this wish, but the vast majority of them regarded it as completely unrealistic, not only because of financial constraints but also because their family lacked the knowledge of how to act in the complex global system of educational migration. Only around 3 per cent of Chinese students abroad are funded by the government and the norm is to rely on family finances or, more rarely, foreign scholarships. Therefore, in spite of the high number of Chinese students in foreign universities, it is important to keep in mind that only a very small minority of Chinese children have this opportunity. Figures are incomplete and often difficult to compare across countries, but according to the Unesco Institute for Statistics only 0.6 per cent of the entire tertiary age group in China in 2012 left to study abroad (referred in Hansen and Thøgersen 2015, 4).

Since 2013, the government has reported that 70–80 per cent of students who have studied abroad return to China to find work. This is a higher number of returning students than seen in previous years (ICEF Monitor 2016). We lack data to see if these returnees succeed in actually achieving what Fong in the quotation above reported to be their aim. Regardless, the widespread urge to study abroad suggests, at the least, that there is a strong belief in the potential of ‘foreign’ (waiguo) education, meaning, in effect, studies in so-called developed countries. This perceived benefit of studying abroad, however, is not merely grounded in a rational choice focusing on the opportunity for upward mobility. Studying abroad is just as much perceived as an option for gaining life changing experiences and for broadening an individual's horizons (Fong 2011; A. S. Hansen 2015; Hansen and Thøgersen 2015).

Since an ever growing number of Chinese middle-class and elite children now study abroad in democratic states and later return home to work, one might expect to find more pressure for change of the Chinese education system. This is still an under-researched topic, but recent studies suggest that Chinese students abroad may indeed become more engaged in institutional reforms at home. Thøgersen’s (2015) in-depth study of Chinese students in a joint Chinese–Danish BA program for pre-school teachers has shown, for instance, how students strengthened their views on the need to reform Chinese education after having spent a year in a Danish college. These students had been critical of the Chinese schools’ focus on exams and discipline already at the high school level; and like so many other students and teachers in China they had cultivated a rather fixed idealized view of Western education being free, open, creative, and less demanding. Thøgersen shows how these students, during their one-year stay abroad, increasingly gave substance to their views on how Chinese education should be changed. They did not ask for systemic political change, and by no means did they become political dissenters. But they developed and expressed a strong – in effect political – wish that Chinese education to a larger extent incorporate values of what they saw as ‘freedom’, ‘individual rights’, ‘equality’, and ‘creativity’. They wanted freedom for children to play, respect for students’ right to privacy, more equality between teachers, students, and parents, and they wanted an education system that
encouraged spontaneity and stimulated creativity.

These students' criticism and suggestions for changes are to some extent in line with the official discourse on the need to make China a more innovative (chuangxin) society through reforms of the education system. However, students seemed to focus on the individual's possibilities and options, while state discourse tends to promote innovation for the broader purpose of strengthening the nation. More research is needed to see how and to what extent returning students actually manage to put into practice some of these views and ideas when entering the educational labor market in China. The students themselves had a sober view of their own potential for making any substantial change (Thøgersen 2015, 121). Processes of individualization in China have indeed led to heightened expectations among students of personal choice and freedoms, and, therefore, the party-state might very well see the need for strengthening, rather than weakening, its attempts to secure their political loyalty and acceptance of authority through schools' disciplining practices.

In general, the path leading to studies abroad has been widened. It is now chosen by those who can afford it, and idealized by those who cannot. It will probably result in a modest introduction of alternative teaching methods and more individualized values in schools, especially in urban areas where returnees find jobs. This, however, will be on a small and localized scale only, and the shorter-term impact of choosing this alternative path is more likely on students' individual life experiences and their future careers.

Conclusion

In the past 20 years the Chinese government has emphasized the need to improve the quality of education at all levels, and it has done much to make compulsory education affordable and accessible to everybody, including children in poorer inland and border regions. Since the 2000s, more attention than ever has been paid to the education of rural children who have migrated to cities with their parents; scholarship programs have made it easier for students from poor families to accept offers of tertiary education in expensive cities if they pass the entrance exam. At the same time, social discrepancies are widening. Urban residents get into esteemed urban colleges with lower grades than rural residents, and ethnic minorities are increasingly deprived of the opportunity to study in their own language in state schools. Vocational education is highly praised in official discourse and encouraged by industry, but it is (and probably for good reasons) regarded by the general public as second class and a last resort. It remains to be seen if any political leaders or university teachers themselves will support their own children going to vocational school if academic alternatives are available. For those who can afford it and understand how to operate in a bureaucratic system, alternatives are often available. The global education market has opened up a wealth of opportunities, hierarchically ordered from prestigious US Ivy League universities to minor colleges throughout the Western world; and a growing number of families belonging to the upper section of the urban middle class are willing to invest in one (maybe in the near future also two) children's education abroad. On the other hand, socio-economically disadvantaged students from rural areas, from urban migrant families, or from vocational schools tend to accept vocational college tracks as their alternative option, to drop out after secondary education, or, for those who can afford it and find it worthwhile, invest in private courses within China, in the hope of improving exam results.

In sum, basic education for all has been strengthened, but social hierarchies created by the educational system are likely to continue solidifying. There is hardly any doubt that the education system will be subjected to new experiments, maybe even reforms, in the coming years. The government's rhetoric, exemplified in its five-year plan from 2016, increasingly emphasizes China's need for a macro-economic transition towards more innovation. Such a transition is also widely regarded internationally as absolutely crucial for China in order to prevent it getting stuck in the 'middle-income-trap' (e.g. Shambaugh 2016, 43). Teachers and educationists at all levels of the system have long been critical of the inflexible forms of teaching and interaction in classrooms that are firmly entrenched because of the examination system. The education system is an
obvious target for major reforms aiming to transform China away from production to a more innovation and knowledge-based economy.

This leads to some major questions. Does the government dare to implement thorough educational reforms that encourage critical thinking, allow students to experiment with different ways to solve problems without a clear outcome in sight, and permit them to interact on a more equal basis with teachers and other authorities? Does it really want to? How would reforms away from rote learning and towards reflective analytical approaches influence students from working-class and rural backgrounds whose parents often do not have an education that allow them to support children's homework? Urban middle-class families are certainly not lowering their expectations for their children's education, and it came as an unpleasant surprise to the authorities when, in May 2016, parents in several larger cities demonstrated against plans to grant rural youth equal opportunity to urban youth when applying to urban colleges (Hernández 2016). The government is under continuous pressure to improve the educational opportunities for rural kids, but, at the same time, it cannot afford to ignore the expectations of a growing urban middle class.

This illustrates how the Chinese government is fighting several educational battles simultaneously. Reforming the education system is a social battle, and it is a political one. Children's access to education is not an issue that is taken lightly by Chinese parents, and when initiating educational reforms the government cannot avoid taking into account the potential social clashes of interests they may spark. Chinese society may be characterized by a collective cultural desire for education, but the deep cleavages of social class, ethnicity, and rural/urban residence are just as important for understanding people's practices of education and their social and economic investments in it. The political battle of education is inherent in the current neo-socialist political system. Although there are some signs that a growing middle class is asking for a less authoritarian and more reflexive education, the call for innovation and creativity comes first of all from the government itself. The top-down ambition is for China to become a world-leading innovative knowledge economy with an education system that reflects and supports this vision but, very importantly, without compromising the CPP's monopoly on the truth. Is that possible? There are no existing models in the world to emulate, so how the government will manage this and how a socially divided population will respond remains to be seen and, not least, studied.

Notes


2. Only in 1907 was female education officially sanctioned by the Qing dynasty, and education for girls continued to develop very slowly during the early years of the Republic (Bailey 2007). For studies on gender inequality in contemporary education see Hannum, Kong, and Zhang 2009; Hannum, Wang, and Adams 2010; Hannum, Zhang, and Wang 2013; Hansen 2001.


4. See also Unger 1982 for a study of education during the Cultural Revolution, based on interviews in Hong Kong with people who had fled China.


7. Officially recognized ethnic minorities were always allowed to have two (sometimes three) children, and since the late 1990s it gradually became formally acceptable for parents with a rural registration to have two children if the first-born was a girl. Since late 2015, the policy has been gradually phased out.

8. See Vickers 2009b on the use of models when teaching ‘thought and politics’ and M. H. Hansen 2015, 88–94 on students’ perception of Lei Feng as a modern model.

9. Much has been written about the discourse of ‘quality’ (suzhi) in China and within Chinese education but see especially Kipnis 2011 for an analysis of its meaning and importance in the practice of Chinese education. The term suzhi jiaoyu is hard to translate in a meaningful way, because it is used in a large variety of contexts, for instance to express how teaching and school books should pay more attention towards students’ need to reflect and not merely reproduce facts, but also how youth (and the rest of the population for that matter) should adhere to certain moral and political standards in their everyday behaviour. Suzhi, or ‘quality’, education is therefore about much more than merely moving away from an exam-driven system of learning.

10. See also Hansen and Woronov 2013 for a comparison between vocational training in urban and rural areas.

11. For examples of analysis of textbooks see M. H. Hansen 2015, Chapter 2; Jones 2012; Vickers 2009b.


14. See Bregnbaek 2016 about how Chinese elite students experience the pressure of being an only child who have successfully gained access to one of the top universities.

15. See Ross and Wang 2016 for a comparison between the discourses on educational innovation in the US and China.

16. There are a growing number of private schools and courses taught in some of the major minority languages, but the real opportunities for minority children to study in their native language in the formal state school system are declining. See for instance articles in Leibold and Yangbin 2014.

References
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