china perspectives

Education and Social Inequality in China

Elite Groups Perpetuating Their Privileged Status

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At a time of growing economic and social inequality in China, there is a tendency to invoke education as a great leveller but that rose-tinted view fails to take cognisance of the role of entrenched vested interests which are in fact nurturing educational disparities precisely because education helps to perpetuate them. Current arrangements in education in China can thus hardly help achieve or promote a harmonious society.

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Expanding income disparities and social inequality among different classes, groups and regions have been emerging as prominent issues in contemporary China. The gaps began to widen when China embarked on the path of reform and opening to the outside world three decades ago. Over these decades, China's economy has been registering some of the fastest growth rates in the world but one crucial question has surfaced above the din: How can China deal with the chasms in respect of income and social standing? Education is regarded by many people as an effective tool for evening out differences. However, that raises the question as to who has access to education. Whether education makes a dent on income differences and social inequality or not depends on the distribution of educational resources. A more equal distribution of resources can be expected to lead to a decrease in income disparities and social inequality. But what has been the experience since the adoption of reform and open-door policies in the late 1970s in China and what influence has it had on economic and social inequalities? This is a crucial question that will be examined here.

Social Stratification

Many scholars have looked into the relationship between education and social development in China. Education is a comprehensive entity that is approached by various strands of social sciences. This paper takes a sociological look at education in China. One model propounded by the American sociologists, Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, attached importance to the influence of education on the attainment of social position. [1] Their theory has had great impact on research into the relationship between education and social stratification in China. Other scholars have noted that before the 1980s, and more specifically, during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), "the advantage of coming from an educated family or an intelligentsia or cadre family was drastically reduced" and the "weak association between father's socio-economic status and son's educational attainment" reflected "massive state intervention." [2] But the distribution became more and more unequal after 1980, and especially after 1990. [3] And the increase in educational opportunities since the mid-1990s has not translated into a more equal distribution of educational resources: Rather the opposite has occurred. [4]

Much emphasis has been placed on the impact of family background, gender, ethnicity and other factors on educational attainment, but there has been insufficient research on the influence of group interests on educational inequality in China. While family background is closely related to

1. Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure*, New York, Wiley, 1967.
2. Deng Zhong and Donald J. Treiman, "The Impact of Cultural Revolution on Trends in Educational Attainment in the People's Republic of China," *American Journal of Sociology,* vol. 103, no. 2, 1997, pp 391-428.
3. Li Chunling, *Duanlie he shuipian: dangdai Zhongguo shehui jieceng de shizheng fenxi* (*Cleavage and Fragment: An Empirical Analysis of Social Stratification in Contemporary China)*, Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe (Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House) Beijing, 2005.
4. Li Yi, "Jiaoyu bupingdeng de zhidu bianqian he chansheng jizhi" (Institutional change and production mechanisms of educational inequality), *Zhongguo shehui kexue (Social sciences journal)* vol. 4, Beijing, 2006, p. 38.



Class in the countryside

group interests, there has been little examination of which groups decision-makers belong to and what motivates their policies with regard to education. Of course, not every policy pertaining to public services can be attributed to group interests and certainly checks and balances play their part. But such checks operate less than efficiently in China.

In the past three decades, the development of education has been determined by the elite groups, i.e. those who are rich or powerful or who hold professional positions in China. The question is whether educational development controlled by these elites can be expected to decrease the inequalities between groups or classes. This article analyses the changes in policy in the field of education and the roles and activities of different groups that have influenced these changes over the past thirty years.

Policies and Their Impact

The distribution of educational resources in China is determined largely by the central government's policies. Over the past three decades, there have been important changes in policy, the biggest among them being that since the early 1980s, governments at different levels have had widely varying responsibilities for education development. This has led to a skewing of educational development between rural and urban areas. The different levels of governments are responsible for the development of education within their administrative jurisdictions. Among their responsibilities, raising financial resources is the most crucial and others are less important. Local governments are expected to be the main financial supporters of education in their areas. This effectively means that at lower levels of administration, there is much less financial backing than in the upper levels. For instance, a survey conducted in 2001 by the Development Research Centre of the State Council (*Guowuyuan fazhan yanjiu zhongxin*), a think-tank of the Chinese cabinet, showed that of the total financial support for rural education, 13% came from the central government, provincial governments and municipalities, 9% from county-level authorities

5. Hu Yifan, "Zhongguo nongcun jiaoyu fazhan wulu kezou" (No resolution for education development in rural China) Beijing, 2002, http://www.zs2002.com/ten/t35173/5.htm (website last consulted on 17 October 2007.

and 78% from rural administrations. [5] Meanwhile, rural governments have the least share of total revenue, while governments at higher levels in China hog the bigger slices of the cake. As a result, most rural governments have little money while retaining the greater part of the obligations. In 2005, the central government took 52.3% of total revenue, whereas its share in total expenditure on education was a mere 5.66%. In fact, the central authorities spent even less before 2003, but have since then sought to invest more in order to write off fees paid by peasants at primary school and middle school levels. [6]

There are big differences in the development of education not only between rural and urban areas but also different regions, cities of different administrative ranking and different schools within the same jurisdiction.

The central government has put much effort into fostering higher education, especially the development of prestigious universities and colleges and has attached much less importance to primary and secondary education. At the level of provinces too, the emphasis has been on nurturing provincial universities, colleges and the most important middle schools. A similar attitude prevails among municipal and county governments. This leaves hardly any resources for schools at the township and village level. Many rural governments have no money to operate schools or to pay teachers' salaries in time. Peasants are forced to pay for the development of rural education. It is one of their biggest burdens. No wonder education in rural areas lags far behind that in the cities. To sum up, governments at higher levels have more funds for education within their administrative districts and residents of advanced regions enjoy more educational resources than those in underdeveloped ones. If that were all, it would be bad enough. But what is worse, some other policies make it even harder for the indigent to cope, as will be seen presently.

Crippling the Poor

In the mid-1990s, the central government put an end to the policy of free higher education as well as guaranteed employment for university students. All students had henceforth to pay for higher education and to compete for jobs in the emerging market economy. But this policy has had a crippling effect on the lower classes i.e. peasants and workers, especially the poor. They lack the ability to support their sons and daughters through many years of tertiary education. And they lack the social networks necessary to help their sons and daughters vie for occupations alongside well-connected urban folk after graduation. In recent years, there have been reports in the Chinese media of some students from poor families having given up their chance of higher education after obtaining the coveted documents granting places in universities and colleges. This is because more and more undergraduates from among the lower classes feel unable to compete for jobs in the absence of the right connections. A survey in 2003 showed more than 120 undergraduates remained unemployed in Huining county in northwestern China's Gansu province. [7] Most of their parents were peasants and had incurred heavy debts in order to support their children's education. And the inability to compete and land jobs meant they were unable to earn and pay off the debts their parents had accumulated. The survey showed increasing unemployment among undergraduates in rural areas.

Another source of continuing inequality is the retention by the central government of the right to dictate how the quota of university places is distributed among different regions of China. It is done according to the administrative ranking of the regions, not according to the proportion of the regional population in the nation's total. This is a recipe for unequal distribution. Thus, Beijing University and Tsinghua University reserve more places for Beijing residents every year than for all the rural areas. Although the central government has allowed increases of the total number of university students as a whole since the mid-1990s and sought to provide more opportunities in higher education, the imbalance in the distribution of regional quotas has not been changed.

Thus, unequal distribution of resources has heightened the inequality in educational opportunities available in different regions of China. On the one hand, inequality as between rural and the urban areas is the biggest, followed by that between advanced regions and those lagging behind, as well as the disparity that sets different levels of administrative jurisdictions apart. On the other hand, policies with regard to making available educational opportunities are weighted against the poor.

Group Interests at Work

Why are such policies being pursued in a country that has long sworn by social justice, which ought to mean everyone

6. Mo Chuanxing, "Zhongguo jiaoyu zhidu bupingdeng yanjiu" (An inquiry into the inequality of educational institutions in China), 25 June 2007 www.360doc.com/showWeb/0/0/389734.asp
7. Wang Chunguang, *Zhongguo nongcun shehui fenhua he nongmin fudan* (*Study of farmers' burden and rural stratification),* Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Social Sciences Documentation Publishing House, Beijing, 2005.

is assured equal access to educational opportunities, regardless of class, ethnic origin, region, gender or age? One possible answer is that the educational policies are related to the dynamics of group interests. In the structure of group interests, those who make policies derive most benefits from them, and those outside the groups are denied any share of power or the opportunity to bargain with the policy-makers. Education is an important resource that can be parlayed for power, money and a good occupation. In sociological theories, education is seen as an important achieved mechanism for realising upward social mobility. But as the above analysis shows, individual effort can run up against the unequal distribution of educational resources. Therefore, education by itself cannot be a tool to achieve social justice, because social class interests influence the allocation of resources. In other words, the upper classes or elite groups try to make use of education in order to maintain their class superiority into the next generation. [8]

As one way of achieving a high social status is through high quality education during childhood and youth, which could open the door to good employment, the elite groups can be expected to make use of education policies in order to safeguard their offspring's interests. They have several advantages that ensure success in this venture. Firstly, almost all the policy-makers live in urban areas, especially in cities, and consider modernising urban education as the priority. Generally speaking, they pour more funds into educational infrastructure in urban areas and reserve more places in institutions of higher learning for city-dwellers. Thanks to superior resources, urban students usually fare better compared to their country cousins and garner more opportunities even in a theoretically level playing field. For example, among rural residents the ratio of those going on from middle school to high school ranged from 22.3% to 18.6% between 1985 and 1999, whereas in urban areas, between 40% and 55.4% graduated from middle to high schools during the same period. As for higher education, urban residents have 5.8 times greater access compared to the rural people. More than 80% of the rural people have no access to higher education. [9] In Beijing and Shanghai, where most of the highest policy-makers live and cluster, the educational infrastructure has received the highest support and funding. Many of the best schools and universities are located in these cities.

Within urban areas, the division between the best schools—i.e. those that prepare students to enter prestigious institutions of higher learning—and general schools is another factor entrenching group differences. The best schools are depended on to help raise more elites for China. The country's leadership is counting on these elites to manage its affairs in the decades ahead. In Chinese cities, both big and small, most of the students in the best schools are those from the upper classes. For example, in Beijing, 57.3% of students in the best high schools are from the upper classes, although they account for just 10% of total population of Beijing. [10] In Maanshan city in eastern China's Anhui province, 67.1% of the students in the best high schools are from upper class families. [11] In Beijing, one of the best middle schools has been supported by 170 million yuan from the city government in the past seven years. [12] But the lavish financial support for that one middle school equals the total annual outlay of a general county in central China. The School's impressive campus boasts a striking architecture and the latest facilities. Interviews conducted by this author elicited the information that two of the highest leaders of China graduated from this school. [13] Children of Beijing's richest families, high-ranking leaders and top professionals account for more than 50% of the students at that school. Such elite schools command good funding and are able to attract the best teachers, ensuring a superior performance by their students in the annual national university examinations.

The city government feels obliged to support the best schools, because many officials' children stand to benefit. Moreover, such a practice gets enthusiastic welcome among top professionals whose social networks form seamless links with those of the leading officials and other wealthy families. Over the past ten years, some Chinese scholars have argued against dividing schools into those for the elite and the general stream. Their view has popular backing but has found little favour with the decision-makers. After all, the best schools serve a useful purpose in safeguarding the elites' superiority in inter-generation mobility.

Migrants' Woes

As for those left out of the best schools, not only are they less able to compete with the elite children at a later stage, many of them suffer blatant discrimination. One group that has long been at a disadvantage is made up of migrant work-

8. In the Chinese context, superior or upper classes may be defined as people who have high social, economical, political or cultural positions.
9. National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007.
10. Mo Chuanxing, *Op. cit.*
11. Mo Chuanxing, *Op. cit.*
12. The name of the school is withheld to protect its identity.
13. Their names are withheld.

ers' children. Migrant workers find many obstacles in the way of educating their children, including blocked access to public (government-run) schools in cities. The central government issued an important document decreeing that authorities at all levels should give equal education rights to migrant workers' children living with their parents as from 2004. [14] But this advice has yet to be fully complied with.

About 20 million migrant children are estimated to be living with their migrant parents, the total number of migrants in China being 150 million. [15] Migrant children's access to public schools has been improving since 2004. According to an official report, 63% of migrant children have gained admission to public schools in Beijing. [16]

In fact, however, it is difficult to calculate how many migrant children live with their parents in Beijing and other cities. A survey conducted by this author in 2007 showed that migrant children outnumber figures cited in the official data because not all of them are necessarily registered with the security departments in cities. Further, the proportion of the migrant children who go to public or government-run schools is less than that estimated by the authorities.

Those migrant children who are barred from the best schools are not free of discrimination elsewhere: In many places they find themselves lumped together into separate class sections and not permitted to study with urban children in the same classrooms. Urban parents do not wish to have their children associating with migrant children and the teachers oblige, in the belief that the urban children's performances would be affected through such association. Social exclusion affects the migrant children's self-respect. The experience of Liu Yi, [17] who moved to Beijing in 2001 with her parents, is a case in point. She had been studying at a school for migrant children in Beijing's Shijingshan until 2005 when her parents secured her admission in a public school in Xicheng district. On the very second day, she was accused of stealing a pencil box by an urban classmate and the teacher accepted the accusation with little consideration. This angered Liu Yi, who was unwilling to continue studying in that school and demanded that her parents send her to a migrant children's school. She said she "hated" urban people as they were unfriendly towards migrants in Beijing. She also said that in the schools for migrant children, all the students were from the rural areas and thus felt equal to each other.

Discrimination against migrant children is a major obstacle to integration into urban society. Moreover, schools for migrants have flexible timings that suit the workers who have to keep long and irregular hours. Another reason for preferring migrants' schools is that they cost less compared to other urban institutions.

Sometimes migrant children face discriminatory acts of a draconian nature, affecting their right to education. In August 2006, the Haidian district government in Beijing closed down 39 schools for migrant children on the grounds that they lacked legal registration. As a result, about 15,000 migrant children found themselves out of school. While the Haidian government said public schools would admit those children, their parents found that in fact none were willing to do so. They had to put their children in schools located in other districts. Some migrant parents said they felt cheated by the Haidian government. However district officials said all the migrant children had been admitted in government-run schools and that none had been refused a school place. [18]

The ban on migrant children's schools was in fact intended to reduce the number of migrants in Haidian district, where incidentally, some of China's top universities and other institutions are located. According to Zhao's survey, schooling is one of the three most difficult issues facing migrant people in Beijing, the other two being the high cost of living and poor access to healthcare. [19]

Migrants in many other cities in China, including Shanghai and Guangzhou, have witnessed similar problems. It is estimated that across China, two thirds of migrant children are not permitted to attend public schools in cities. [20] Governments at different levels in China are, in effect, failing to protect the right of children to education. Most of the children take recourse to schools opened by migrant people. These lack trained teachers or good quality facilities that ought to have been accorded to them by virtue of laws covering education. In fact, the very lack of good facilities and teachers in such schools is held against them and they get banned, as happened in Beijing's Haidian district in 2006. Like in Haidian, authorities in many other places have sought to force migrant people to move elsewhere by banning schools

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14. Document No. 1 issued by the State Council in 2003.
15. National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2007.
16. Zhao Weihua, "Nongmingong rongru Beijing shehui de diaocha" (Survey on the integration of migrant workers into Beijing society) *Lanpishu: Zhongguo shoudu shehui fazhan* (*The Blue of Book of Beijing: Social Development of the Chinese Capital),* Shehui kexue wenxian chubanshe, Beijing 2007.
17. She was 11 at the time she was interviewed by the author in 2003.
18. Interviews with the author in August 2006.
19. Zhao Weihua, *Op. cit.*
20. "Shi baofu haishi zeren? Kaowen 'nongmingong zinu shangxue nan,'" (Is it burden or responsibility? Taking serious consideration of the difficulties in the schooling of migrant workers'children) 28 April 2006 http://www.ce.cn/cysc/agriculture/gdxw/200604/28/t20060428_6851440.shtml (Website last consulted on October 17)



A countryside primary school in Shaanxi province, Huxian county. Class is held outdoors for safety due to the schoolhouse being in danger of collapsing.

catering to their children. Most local governments ignore their responsibility to guarantee equal education for migrant children, believing any such concessions would harm the quality of education in their jurisdictions. In one of the advanced south-eastern provinces, some high officials from the education administrative department said in interviews that it was not their responsibility to take on the task that ought to be fulfilled by some other province the migrants hail from. [21] This is tantamount to denial of the right to education of the migrant children in the cities where they live with their parents.

So far no institutional mechanism has emerged in China to promote, fulfil and protect the equal rights of all children to education and to empower them to claim and safeguard that right. According to the education laws and orders issued by the central government in 2004, migrant children's education rights should be guaranteed by the local governments in receiving areas. But in fact, the rights are ignored by the local officials. Such a violation of the right to education has never been punished. Rather it has been encouraged and supported by members of the upper classes, who prefer to keep their children away from the company of migrants. The interests of upper classes have not been challenged nor threatened by other classes, because the latter are weak. They are unable to influence the policies that affect their children's education and are prevented from protesting in public. So they can only use the "weapons of the weak" to express their discontent: Some migrants silently leave for cities where their children face less of a rejection or leave them with the grandparents in the home province. In some extreme instances farmers killed themselves because they could not raise the money to send their sons or daughters to universities in recent years. [22] The media sometimes tries to

21. The name of the province is withheld.

22. "Wei erzi shang daxue ,zhongbing muqin zisha" (Seriouly ill mother kills herself as she has no money for son's higher education), 7 August 2007. http://www.nanfangdaily.com.cn/southnews/djjz/200708070505.asp (Website last consulted on 17 October).

help them out by filing reports that make society take notice and bring some pressure to bear on the authorities, especially of the central government. Nevertheless, until now, no forthright measure or policy has been adopted to weaken the relationship between education and the interests of the upper classes.

Education and Social Harmony

The highest leaders of the Communist Party and the state have taken cognisance of the state of education in rural China and the imbalance in the distribution of resources, which can adversely affect national modernisation and result in social conflict. To be sure, they have devised some educational policies to address these concerns. They pledged to provide free compulsory education for all rural people within three years from 2005 and to invest more to help rural children's access to higher education. In 2004, the central government demanded that local governments extend compulsory education to migrant children. Education is free for all rural people starting from 2007. And university students from poor families have been promised financial support. All these measures have tinkered with the problems to some extent. [23]

But the basic infrastructure behind the uneven distribution of resources has not been overhauled. The central government may demand that schools cease charging for compulsory education in rural areas but the reality is that many schools simply cannot function without raising money to meet expenses that are not met by the local administration or governments at higher levels. Financial support for rural schools is supposed to come from county and township administrations but they lack the money for their own expenses, let alone having to fork out funds for educating children in far off villages. Surveys conducted by this author in 2007 showed some rural schools went to great lengths to meet the demands of daily expenditure and in many cases it was the peasants who were left holding the bill.

Meanwhile, the *Hukou*, or household registration system and other related institutionalised forms of exclusion have changed little, keeping migrant people out in the cold. They are far from getting equal citizenship alongside urban residents and their integration into urban societies is still far off. The central authorities' desire to construct a harmonious society comes up against many such obstacles but the preservation of group interests as seen in their failure to tackle discrimination in the educational arena root and branch, is the biggest as it continues discrimination in succeeding generations.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, educational policies and distribution of resources have been transformed. But the main trend of the changes has not been positive and has only exacerbated inequalities between different classes or groups and regions in China. The networks based on social classes have played a major role in the distribution of resources and opportunities. Powerful officials, urban intellectuals and professionals as well as other people with wealth have used their influence to change the distribution of educational opportunities in a way that benefits their own interests. So the social structure and educational policies have only gone about expanding social inequality in China.

Educational inequality is among the three principal inequalities in China, the other two being inequality in the power equations and inequality of incomes. Compared with other types of inequalities, education may give the impression of being rational and legal. It would appear to people that education places great emphasis on performance and achievement, through impartial indicators such as examinations. But few care to reflect on the irrationality and injustice that lies behind education in the form of institutionalised discrimination that puts tens of millions of children at a disadvantage. In fact, many people in rural China have despaired of benefiting from education and have turned their backs on schools. The idea that "going to schools is useless" is gaining ground and is likely to pose a big challenge to China's modernisation plans.

Thus, although educational equality is important for the construction of a harmonious society that is sought by the current Chinese leadership, the balance of forces between different social groups or classes gives little cause for optimism. The lower classes are unable to make a dent in the policies that put them at a great disadvantage. They lack the power to influence decision-makers and to persuade them to adopt rational and equitable educational policies. The key to achieving a harmonious society would thus be to empower the people at large so that they can one day have a say in making decisions on education. •

23. http://www.gov.cn/banshi/gm/jiaoyu.htm website last consulted on 17 October.