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Class and Inequality in Chinese Education

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Introduction

On 26 April 1992, the Chinese press announced that scientists had developed their own form of the miracle drug interferon that would be mass produced shortly. The announcement came two days after the International Telecommunication Satellite Organization announced that it would use China's 'Long March' rocket for satellite launches in 1995-96 [1], and two and a half weeks after the State Commission of Science and Technology announced a commitment to send its own astronauts into space before the year 2000 [2]. These achievements are remarkable for any developing country, but are especially noteworthy for a country that also admits to having an illiterate population of 180 million people (illiteracy being defined as the inability to read a minimum of 2000 characters if one lives in an urban area, 1500 characters if one lives in rural China), and 2 million children who are not enrolled in school at all [3]. It is the basic assumption of this paper that insofar as the above-noted information highlights the existence of increased technological prowess amidst widespread social inequality in China, an analysis of social class issues and their relationship to education not only holds the key to understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the world's largest educational system, but can also contribute to a broader discussion of education and equity in comparative terms.

Carnoy and Samoff have argued that Third World states with conditioned socialist economies often develop educational systems that perform contradictory functions [4]. Policies that offer the promise of expanding educational opportunity represent regimes' efforts to reinforce perceptions of political inclusivity. Indeed, providing basic education to a citizenry speaks directly to those issues of distributive justice the state is expected to promote [5]. However, conflicting demands that encourage the development of skill and expertise in technical terms tend to reinforce inherited traditional hierarchies that are bureaucratic, exclusive, and decidedly undemocratic. The inability of conditioned socialist states to resolve these educational contradictions is reflective of the precarious nature of their political viability and can be explained in part by their inheritance of traditional,

state-operated bureaucracies, external threats to their security, and their participation in a world economy dominated by core capitalist countries.

I believe that the Chinese case differs from the Carnoy–Samoff model to the extent that the pretence of using education for the purpose of fostering political inclusivity has been abandoned during the post-Mao era. This may not be surprising, given a climate that has encouraged economic privatisation, commodity fetishism, political decentralisation, growing regional economic inequality, and increased participation in a global economy dominated by core powers under the rubric of commodity socialism. But, and understanding of educational practice in light of these conditions can accomplish a number of aims. It can shed light upon the successful manipulation of formal educational structures so as to reproduce the power and privilege of one's class; it can address the particular, and overtly political terms through which issues of educational quality and the appropriate standards for measuring quality are defined; and it can inform us about the social constraints that have impeded the creation of a civil society in China, an impediment that has circumscribed efforts to promote successful political reform.

The Nature of Social Class

As it may be useful to view issues of social class in expansive terms, particularly when engaged in comparative analysis, Anthony Giddens' theory of the structuration of class relationships holds specific salience for our purposes. Giddens defines class structuration as the modes in which economic relationships become translated into non-economic structures [6]. Of key importance is the extent to which individuals view the possibilities for upward economic mobility as being open or closed, so as to "provide for the reproduction of common life experiences over generations" [7]. One notes the similarity between "structuration of class relationships" and Bourdieu's notion of habitus, where it is argued that one's future aspirations are internalised according to social practices developed in accordance with the type and quality of one's external environment [8]. In both cases, the role of educational institutions in reinforcing or mediating prevailing social practice, results in the sorting out of educational (and social) winners and losers and becomes crucial to our understanding of how social classes are formed and operate.

An expansive view of social class is also sensitive to the ways in which we structure time and space, so as to conform to conventional values and attitudes. Historically, for example, the linkage of time to work encouraged the creation of a capitalist ethic that measured the worth of one's productivity in terms of efficiency [9]. Marxist geographers such as David Harvey and Manuel Castells further argue that one must examine social practice with reference to space in light of housing settlement and community formations, if one is to adequately understand how classes appropriate the capital they acquire; patterns of residential differentiation reflect an unequal distribution of space that is not random, but is directly based upon class affiliation. Where one lives, or one's ability to choose where one lives, becomes intertwined with the accumulation of capital for the purposes of defining personal aspiration and class identity [10].

Under these terms, the political implications of ownership of the means of production or control over the conditions of one's work (even if the work has inherent economic consequence), the ways in which social relations of all types are patterned according to the values and authority relations evident in the work place, and the ways in which we spend accumulated capital determine class composition and class relations. Schools form an extremely important part of the equation since they are expected to prepare prospective workers for the work place while also instilling in future citizens a respect

for the authority of the state. Although these factors bear important consideration in light of the dramatic economic changes that have occurred within China over the past decade, there are unique characteristics of the Chinese social structure that also should be kept in mind.

Social Class in China

In many respects, Maoist China mirrored the archetype Leninist state, with the party controlling a command-oriented economy, centrally regulating rural and urban markets. In general terms, the Leninist conception of party evolved during the twentieth century to mean more than an institution playing the simplistic role as agent of the working class. The party defined class consciousness and ideological orthodoxy for all groups in historic as well as contemporary terms, according to the experiences of its own members; yet through exercising control of the market-place, the party not only oversaw the expansion of a centralised state bureaucracy, but its members themselves became part of that bureaucracy, fusing self-interest with state policy [11]. Mao's own dissatisfaction with creeping bureaucratism and his reliance upon mass mobilisation techniques to bypass official party hierarchies and destroy class enemies is well known, for it culminated in the Cultural Revolution.

But perhaps the greatest accomplishment of Mao's China was the party's ability to politically penetrate and integrate peripheral areas. In a country with an overwhelming peasant population, political control of rural areas reached its zenith with the creation of communes during the Great Leap Forward, formed according to traditional marketing areas. Vivian Shue describes communal and county organisation as having replicated a honeycomb administrative structure, with both units compelled to respond to provincial and centralised directives without having had direct contact with sister units [12]. As is true of many systems with centralised command and policy-making features, local resistance to official directives was quite pronounced, as local cadres used both defensive and aggressive strategies to blunt external aims. Defensive strategies included efforts to protect localities through under-reporting grain production. Local officials used aggressive strategies to enhance their own power base by overtly bending or reinterpreting official rules whenever possible. Shue's conclusion is that by the late 1970s, the administrative centre had lost control over the periphery [13].

During the post-Mao era, policy-makers have expanded market mechanisms in rural areas and have abolished the former insular political structures such as communes in an effort to defeat localism. As the peasant household has become the central unit of social life, and as rural production has become increasingly commercialised with the growth of peasant-operated enterprises and businesses, lateral relations between members of various villages have been strengthened; relationships outside the village are more contractual today than hierarchical. The result has been the creation of weblike political structures that have replaced the honeycomb, with central authorities more aware of village activities, but able to influence local conditions only indirectly [14]. At the same time, factionalism and violence have increased, as have clientism and personal patronage [15]. Cultivation of market forces has also produced increased regional inequality encouraged by the central government, for when the central government awards affluent coastal provinces more favourable currency exchange rates so as to expedite trade with foreign investors, these provinces exploit their less favoured counterparts by buying products from the poorer provinces below international market value. They then use the ensuing domestic exchange surpluses that are accumulated for their own purposes [16].

An unintended result has been the devolution of central authority, not only with respect to the recapture of local wealth, but with respect to increased dependency upon foreign markets too.

In urban China, the role of the city was production rather than commercial or consumption oriented during the first 30 years of the People's Republic. As was true of rural areas, urban development was hierarchical, and lines of bureaucratic authority were vertically drawn between provincial and municipal authorities. During the post-Mao era though, there has been an effort to increase networking with sister cities and rural areas as urban commercialisation has been enhanced, although hierarchical characteristics continue to define central government/city relationships [17]. Still, since the late 1980s, state enterprises have been eclipsed by the growth of private companies and joint ventures as increased commercialisation of the urban sector continues.

How have these broad developmental changes affected social relations in China? During the first 30 years of the People's Republic, it seems that the peasant village household remained largely intact; external political pressures modified certain aspects of traditional behaviour but were most successfully assimilated into local cultures when they were viewed as being non-threatening to traditional beliefs [18].

In urban China, the situation was somewhat different. The successful political penetration of neighbourhoods and work places created pressures for adhering to group loyalties formed outside of the family [19]. An effective household registration system along with an enforced sense of collective dependency within the work place restricted upward and/or geographical mobility [20]. State-operated enterprises and bureaucracies rewarded the cultivation of personal connections, friendships and the maintenance of strong social relationships within the work unit. Urban industries, subjected to the 'iron ricebowl mentality', were plagued by inefficiency and an under-utilisation of staff, as they adhered to commitments guaranteeing workers lifetime employment. Wages and bonuses were universally allocated according to set formulas, creating a rigid stratification system throughout the country. Strategies for obtaining the significant benefits allocated by state-run enterprises: subsidised housing, medical care, guaranteed employment in the city, etc., were defined by mobility aspirations conditioned by one's class background and presumed party loyalty.

Until the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, class affiliation was an inherited characteristic, defined in terms of parental status as of 1949. A form of reverse discrimination existed whereby one was considered to have 'bad class background' if one's parents were economically privileged in 1949 and 'good class background' if one's parents were peasants or workers at that time. Active participation in party affairs provided some of those who were viewed as possessing good class background with the opportunity to secure economic and social benefits; educational achievement was seen as providing those with bad class backgrounds with similar opportunities. Attempts to redefine the red versus expert equation with reference to university admissions policies and commensurate efforts to reinterpret class loyalty according to ideological criteria (possession of class consciousness) rather than the inheritance of social position (class background) formed a pretext for the factionalism that engulfed the Cultural Revolution [21].

The development of China's educational system mirrored many of these trends, reflecting the inequities of a rural-dominated population, controlled by urban elites, particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s. During the 1950s, the system assimilated many of the characteristics of the Soviet educational model: standardised curricula, heavy emphasis upon technical and specialised education, separation between teaching

and research functions, promotion within the system driven by examination, etc [22]. In rural areas, periodic attempts were made to address local needs following Mao's Yan'an experiments of the 1930s. They included the establishment of worker-peasant accelerated middle schools (abandoned in 1955) and people's (*minban*) schools during the Great Leap Forward [23]. Yet these efforts were viewed as second-rate alternatives to formal institutions and never received the degree of support afforded conventional urban education structures. Still, by the 1970s, educational access in rural China had expanded; rural schools were supported by state and provincial funds in part; deficits were addressed by local units. As they were considered to be part of the commune political structure, they were generally accepted by the local population as being an important part of village life, except in isolated areas with poor transportation facilities, where the establishment of primary schools and the hiring of teachers was more difficult [24].

By the 1980s, Cultural Revolution efforts to redress systemic inequality and elitism had been totally rejected. The reinstatement of a national university entrance examination system, provincially administered in 1977, centrally administered since 1978, the allocation of key schooling designations which legitimised the awarding of disproportionate funds, resources, better teachers and students, etc., to favoured primary, middle and university institutions, experiments with strict ability grouping at all age levels, and the centralisation of textbook development and dissemination were some of the policies enacted in order to guarantee educational quality and upgrade standards by overtly depoliticising the terms through which educational standards were defined.

Two points should be emphasised. First, many of these policies were not new, but were popular during the 1950s and 1960s [25]. Educational quality was thus defined in conservative rather than progressive terms. Second, in rejecting the ideological messages that accompanied educational reform during the Cultural Revolution, educators sought to link policy with economic development as defined through enhancing collective production capability [26]. Efforts to centralise the control and distribution of educational resources thus represented a view of top-down governance that was similar to the way in which other administrative units were operated through the early 1980s.

During the mid to late 1980s though, Chinese educators confronted pressures for reform that were influenced by the external social developments of which we have spoken: the move from a command to a market economy, a commercial rather than productive urban emphasis, and increased consumerism and cultural commodification. Resulting educational reforms included a compulsory education law in 1986 that acknowledged the limited educational opportunities available in rural areas while calling for their remediation through increased school construction and teacher training so as to effect compulsory universal education by 1995, a move to allow select universities and individual enterprises to play a greater role in directly allocating jobs to graduates bypassing official labour exchange commissions, efforts to give some school administrators and university officials increased autonomy with respect to decision-making, increased responsibility placed upon educational institutions for obtaining financial self-sufficiency, and an increased emphasis upon expanding secondary and tertiary technical and vocational opportunities. Although many of the policies encouraging greater institutional autonomy were scaled back in the immediate aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre, the tensions characterising centre-periphery economic and political relationships within the country as a whole are evident within the Chinese educational system in particular. The remaining part of this paper will examine these tensions in light of social class considerations with specific reference to the exercise of autonomy, and changing views of time and space.

Rural Education

The contradictions inherent in a system that centralises curricular decision-making, textbook allocation, and the determination of teacher training qualification while decentralising key elements of local management and financial responsibility are sharply felt in rural Chinese schools. Although responsibilities for making education decisions are shared among units at various administrative levels—the State Education Commission, provincial education commissions or departments, county education bureaus, township education officers or the principal of a village school—Cheng Kai-ming notes that a policy of “sponsorship at three levels, administration at two levels”, has been in place since the 1980s.

In practical terms, this means that senior secondary schools should be sponsored by counties, junior secondary schools by townships and primary schools by villages. ‘Sponsorship’ here is taken to mean the financing as well as ownership of schools. In terms of administration, the county authority is expected to administer senior secondary schools; the township authority to administer both junior secondary and primary schools, since there is no administrative structure at the village level [27].

With respect to the securing of funds, provincial allocations to local schools only partially subsidise recurring expenses, and the generation of funding through collection of local revenues, taxes, voluntary donations and institution-generated income is essential if rural schools are to maintain their viability. Professor Cheng notes that in Liaoning Province, in 1986 for example, 74.8% of all funding sources were derived from local initiatives as opposed to provincial allocations [28]. At the same time, it is the responsibility of appropriate provincial authorities to insure local compliance with national standards and directives as initially defined by the State Education Commission. Their role includes controlling teacher training, monitoring primary school graduation examinations, and facilitating local planning initiatives that meet compulsory education targets [29].

In China’s poorest rural areas, basic education includes no more than a few years of schooling at best, but even in these situations, systemic contradictions sharply define the quality and characteristics of the social experiences of the various educational actors. If one teaches in a rural school, one’s categorisation as a *minban* as opposed to *gongban* (public) teacher is crucial in determining remuneration, status, and professional identity. ‘*Minban*’ teachers are considered to lack appropriate teaching qualifications (graduation from a secondary school or formal teacher training programme), and unlike their *gongban* counterparts, are paid solely through local township initiatives. As a result, their pay is irregular, their professional status second class. Certainly, division of labour based upon status hierarchy exists throughout the world. But in the Chinese case, rural teachers of all types confront situations where their work is generically devalued, since so many of the crucial decisions affecting educational policies are made at provincial and state levels. Jean Robinson points out that the continued existence of *minban* schools and *minban* teachers is an embarrassment to central authorities, for their presence highlights the impossibility of implementing compulsory education practices according to pre-determined standards and quality levels [30]. But how must rural constituents—teachers, students, peasants—feel when they are asked to contribute to the implementation of a policy knowing that the results of their efforts will be considered inherently inferior? Furthermore, when basic educational practice becomes so standardised so as to deny the

existence of local cultural and geographical specificity, what then motivates townships and villages to invest in any form of education at all?

Cheng Kai-ming has argued that educational investment at the local level is more likely in areas that view enhanced educational investment as providing inhabitants with the technical sophistication necessary for further economic growth. In this instance, decentralisation of local school management and finances enhances community decision-making and is empowering. The overriding concern, however, is that once educated, students and teachers will not return to their native locales [31]. Others argue that villages and townships that are extremely affluent or impoverished will invest heavily in education, for in the former case the cost is manageable, and in the latter case there is little to lose as alternative modes of upward mobility are not viable. However, townships and villages with modest production capability adjacent or near their more affluent sister units will be less likely to invest in schooling and will tolerate a greater degree of drop-out, as singular devotion to farm labour and rural enterprise is viewed as a quicker and more likely method of obtaining household affluence [32].

It is clear that the worth of rural education is defined in comparative terms by central, provincial and local authorities, terms which fuse sense of place with more conventional issues of access and upward mobility. One can, for example, view the worst problems rural teachers confront (inadequate and irregular pay, lack of safety and personal protection to the point of facing physical assault, teaching in dilapidated structures without windows or suitable ventilation, etc.) as at least in part due to local resistance to the concept of the externally defined modern school, a generic structure that symbolically situates itself outside of one's traditional sense of place [33]. Alternatively, as village networking is growing, rural peasants themselves are increasingly defining their immediate physical environment in comparative terms. The dilemmas that agricultural middle vocational schools confront (their inability to provide graduates with more favourable employment opportunities along with traditional questions of appropriate fit between the nature of one's training and the actual demands of one's work [34]) can be viewed within a context where rural/urban differences are more explicit than ever before because rural isolation is eroding. It is not surprising that the lowest end of the educational pyramid would offer its participants a modest degree of status and autonomy. But the uneven commitment to mass basic education in rural areas, in spite of the formation of centrally controlled and provincially administered policy decisions that allow for local consultation, raises questions as to educational effectiveness in promoting both political and social inclusivity along with basic literacy [35]. On the contrary, recent efforts promoting both consolidation and differentiation of rural schooling at the county level have had the effect of closing some schools while differentiating to an even finer degree, the number of schools at various levels designated as key (*zhongxin*) or non-key, apart from national or provincial designations [36].

Urban Education

Chinese urban education can be characterised as confronting a different set of problems. The re-initiation of a national entrance examination system created a meritocratic metaphor that has reverberated throughout all urban social settings, for in supposedly linking opportunities for social reproduction to educational achievement rather than ascriptive criteria (party affiliation, personal connection, etc.), a fundamental change in value orientation affecting social relationships of all types may be occurring. Employers now regularly administer tests as a way of rationalising hiring decisions and worker

transfers. And, the possession of educational qualifications has become important even to those seeking to upgrade their party member and PLA standing [37]. Indeed, reform through labour camps and prisons now seeks to demonstrate their effectiveness in pointing to offender rehabilitation through noting the diplomas and certificates received by inmates [38]. However, the association of educational assessment with the acquisition of competence has had its clearest influence upon educational policy throughout various levels of the formal educational system, with the national entrance examination system driving policy.

Institutional reputation at all levels has been determined by selectivity, as largely defined by examination scores. Key universities have sought to maintain and enhance their status according to the overall examination scores of matriculated students; senior middle schools have sought to enhance their reputations by ensuring that as many graduates as possible who are allowed to apply obtain university entrance; primary school reputation is based upon feeder school relationships with prestigious middle schools and so on. To be sure, competition occurs among the key schools only, for one's chances of obtaining university admission are severely restricted if one is affiliated with a non-key school. And, the use of testing at all levels both rules out marginal students before their future aspirations are set and legitimises early selection patterns at primary and middle school levels.

There are a number of important exceptions to the generalisation. Since the mid-1980s, a number of prestigious senior middle schools, noting that their graduates have not performed as well as had been expected on the university entrance examinations, have negotiated informal feeder networks with select universities, guaranteeing places for some of their graduates [39]. In an effort to alleviate financial constraints, some universities have lowered minimum entrance examination scores for commuter as opposed to residential students. The use of testing for primary and junior middle school admission has been criticised and somewhat curtailed, as has the mechanical use of ability grouping at early grade levels to enhance the academic performance of the designated gifted. In an effort to reduce the importance of the university entrance examination as the sole criterion for determining university admissions, there have been experiments with using more varied forms of student assessment at the senior secondary level (*huikao*), although the result has been an actual increase in testing there [40]. Incidences of cheating and corruption related to university examination performance continue to be quite common [41]. And, as universities and secondary schools have been asked to finance a greater part of their budgets themselves, money-making schemes that allow affluent students to buy a place in the desired institution continue to occur.

Still, at least until the mid-1980s, the use of the examination process as a means of selecting future elites held value, particularly for those who no longer viewed party loyalty and the cultivation of personal connections as a legitimate or inclusive means of enhancing intergenerational mobility. An examination-driven curriculum that is standardised masks social differences and resource inequalities that invariably affect individual performance. There are key secondary middle schools that successfully pursue international exchanges and networks with elite sister institutions all over the world, and there are senior middle schools that require security guards to maintain day to day order. The universality of the examination process hides these differences, conveying the message that standardisation of assessment guarantees the equality of opportunity to succeed, with failure occurring as a result of personal deficiency. To be sure, attempts to diversify the curriculum on a regional basis continue in experimental form, but it appears that they are being implemented in supplemental fashion, rather than as alternatives to their standard-

ised counterparts [42]. The State Education Commission has decided to institutionalise a differentiated national curriculum reflecting five different socio-economic and educational conditions throughout the country. However, as Paine and DeLany argue, the act of admitting existing regional disparity while still maintaining centralised control of curricular decision-making and materials production, may do little more than codify existing inequalities rather than begin to resolve them [43].

Is it the case that schools in urban China can perform the role of social leveler, reducing social inequality? This is perhaps a key question for which there is little good evidence. However, Stig Thøgersen, in an important regional study of the Yantai district in Shandong Province, concludes that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds who are able to attend county or urban key schools, have been able to maximise their opportunities for upward mobility through successfully climbing the educational ladder [44]. Of course one must be circumspect in generalising the findings. And, the rapid expansion of secondary technical and vocational education over the past decade must be viewed, not simply as a response to external pressures for enhanced economic development, but as an alternative method of facilitating upward mobility apart from schools' contributing to the social reproduction of intellectual elites in traditional ways. If, however, rapid secondary technical and vocational development is an example of institutional accommodation to external pressures for change, one must note that the perceived value of these programmes to students is often influenced by external factors influencing their growth—job availability, the conditions of one's work after securing employment, attractiveness of one's earning power in a non-state supported enterprise, the reputation of the enterprise affiliated with the vocational programme, etc.—rather than the perceived intrinsic value of the curriculum and training *per se*. Under these terms, successful vocational programmes perform cooling out functions, preserving the integrity of traditional academic curricula.

Indeed, it can be argued that the curricular and instructional practices of urban schools for the most part remain removed from normal social concerns, as educators themselves express a deep ambivalence concerning their success in enumerating appropriate moral values and concerns within school walls [45]. Both students and teachers operate within sheltered administrative units that are inflexible and rigid, a rigidity highlighted by the contrasting economic conditions that have been described previously. As these conditions contribute to increases in youth unemployment, drop-out, and ensuing juvenile crime, school authorities receive their share of the blame for these problems (one report, for example, argued that in some detention facilities 80% of all adolescent criminals were illiterate or have received substandard education). [46]

Although there has been some movement toward increased decision-making by local principals, teachers, and administrators [47], teacher status, even in urban areas, is not particularly high. Teacher pay remains inadequate; teacher training is afforded an officially prescribed status lower than other tertiary fields of study. It is ironic that the low social status of primary and middle school teachers is conditioned by the hierarchy and elitism of the educational system they serve and promote. Typical responses to these conditions include increased moonlighting or leaving the profession altogether for more lucrative alternatives. It would not be too great an exaggeration to conclude that urban Chinese education alienates both students and teachers in significant numbers [48].

University Education

In the past, a university education in China provided graduates with an urban job in a

state-affiliated enterprise that included some measure of financial security with subsidised housing and other important social benefits. Due to policies of deliberate inbreeding at China's best universities, outstanding graduates were allowed to teach at their home universities, and at least in the ideal sense, the life of the post-Cultural Revolution university professor promised a reasonable degree of comfort and security. More importantly, that life afforded the intellectual elite a measure of autonomy unknown in lower levels of the educational system and included greater opportunities for curricular innovation and study and travel abroad. China's universities have lacked the autonomy of sister institutions in the West and were always subjected to strong party and state control. But in the immediate years preceding Tiananmen, educational reforms gave university officials greater freedom to run their own affairs, provide for financial self-sufficiency, and in some instances, work directly with employers in placing graduates [49]. Student political organisations after 1986 also became more independent as official surveillance of their activities loosened [50].

Such changes reinforced an independent intellectual tradition that viewed the intellectual as a moral-political actor, endowed with the authority to demand political reform by virtue of one's intellect. It is not surprising that China's intellectuals had embraced the ethic of professionalism by the eve of Tiananmen, an ethic that was appealing in combining both Confucian autonomy and the increasing privatisation induced by a freer market. The curiosity of social scientists organising private companies to conduct public opinion research [51] or journalists conducting independent investigations of official corruption bears witness to the point, although it should be noted that important differences characterised Western and Chinese views of professionalism. In the West, professions grew independently as members imposed upon themselves regulations for accreditation or acceptable standards of ethical behaviour that later received state approval. In the Chinese case, professional autonomy devolved from state institutions and was always more limited. In the West, given the inherently private nature of professional association, the creation of the service ethic was extremely important, for it rationalised the exercise of personal autonomy in the name of helping the greater population. In the Chinese case, I would argue that similar service obligations were less overtly expressed because service to the state was considered to be an implicit part of one's intellectual mission.

Certainly, one's professional status and autonomy varied according to the higher education unit with which one was associated, the researcher affiliated with the Academy of Sciences or Academy of Social Sciences possessing greater autonomy than the faculty member associated with the regional teacher training university. But during the years immediately preceding Tiananmen, one finds those intellectual elites at the top levels of the educational pyramid informally networking, creating salon-type study groups that emboldened their critiques of government policy, forming research groups connected to official administrative units but not subject to overt party domination, and using their positions in official research institutes and organisations under the control of the Party to offer critical advice [52]. Professionalism in this context meant loosening the patronage ties with official party and government sponsors; it meant creating a nascent, private media channel through independently publishing, selling and distributing research results in newly formed journals and newspapers. Indeed, official government agencies themselves commissioned private research studies, understanding the value of discovering what people actually believed [53]. Yet in spite of these trends, the ties that bonded intellectuals to the state were never cleanly broken.

Enhanced professionalism within university walls could be seen through attempts to

reward professors according to merit in salary and rank allocations, although those efforts conflicted with strongly entrenched seniority systems [54]. With respect to curricular change, the natural sciences became the most popular areas for study and research, due to their presumed immunity from political influence, an important consideration in light of Cultural Revolution efforts to overtly politicise the humanities and social sciences. Of course, the pursuit of scientific inquiry demands that one follow a predetermined set of conventions with specific value orientations: the importance of first discovery, generalisable verification of results through repeated testing according to agreed upon procedure, the primacy of prediction, etc. One must also note that pursuing serious scientific research held the promise of entering an elite international community of scholars, and in so doing, transcending national as well as parochial borders. More importantly, the scientific paradigm presented an alternative world view that replaced discredited Maoist epistemology with an ideology that saw truth in terms of ordered rationality. Certainly study of the social sciences and study in the professions derived from the traditional social sciences began to regain popularity when their advocates adopted the positivist assumptions of scientific inquiry to their particular fields.

It has been argued that Chinese education and Chinese higher education specifically, has historically demonstrated a unique degree of flexibility in borrowing eclectically from foreign models while maintaining traditional normative value claims. Classroom rituals and curricular and pedagogical orientations have gravitated from the expressive to the instrumental, from weak framing and classification mechanisms, to strong ones, based upon weak as opposed to strong collection codes [55]. During the early 1980s, the acceptance of scientific and positivist paradigms increased pressures for disciplinary specialisation, the erection of firm disciplinary boundaries and the implementation of strong framing and classification schemes. But by the late 1980s, there was a greater acceptance of the professions as newly emerging areas of study; interdisciplinary study increased, as did professional, technical and vocational education. These innovations coincided rather than conflicted with the more traditional academic fields. Economic trends did affect curriculum, as the expansion of management, finance, trade, and international and comparative studies attests. But the limits to which such experimentation can affect basic access questions are quite clear, in light of the enforced enrollment restrictions limiting admissions to many social science and humanities areas put in place after 1989 [56].

We have previously noted that issues of professional advancement through rank, and the awarding of salary and other benefits began to be redefined in the early 1980s. It is equally important to recognise that the resurrection of Chinese higher education in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution also included the awarding of advanced degrees and the creation of credit-generating short-term elective courses. Most recently, nationwide graduate school entrance examinations have been instituted for prospective masters degree students [57]. All of these developments influence sense of time and place. The introduction of credit hour systems and shorter term elective courses in particular, symbolically associates the value of acquired knowledge with the divisible time spent pursuing that knowledge; coupled with the awarding of degrees and certificates, the worth of one's academic experience is commodified. Certainly, the internationalisation of university curricula presents interesting and creative possibilities for curricular reform and innovation. But these efforts have also called into question the importance of pursuing traditional areas of study and modes of inquiry: Chinese as opposed to Western methods of treating illness, studying the practice of law from Western as opposed to traditional perspectives, etc. [58].

Tiananmen and After

This paper, in offering an overview of the Chinese educational system, has sought to associate the various components of the system with the relative degree of autonomy they offer their participants and practitioners, defining autonomy in terms of space and time as well as financial remuneration, status, decision-making responsibilities, etc. It has been argued that curriculum and instructional practices symbolically reflect the conditions of one's work within educational settings and that the same pressures affecting social relations in rural and urban areas, expressed as the country moves from a command, production-oriented economy to a commercial, consumption-oriented one, have affected the educational system too. An underlying assumption is that issues of educational quality were continually defined in terms of audience (quality for whom?), selectivity, and personal autonomy, and that in spite of attempts to initiate significant educational reform, the system continued to cater to the aspirations of changing urban elites on the eve of the Tiananmen uprising. The educational system, during the post-Mao era, influenced by similar considerations that have characterised other Leninist states, never fully articulated a sense of political inclusivity that would have addressed the needs of constituents from every background. Instead, the party leadership understood the need to reproduce intellectuals' expertise as a necessary pre-requisite to advancing technologically, while fearing the traditional independence from state control intellectuals sought to preserve for themselves. Although the merging of roles, of technocrat and apparatchik, was somewhat successfully accomplished by Soviet intellectual elites in the Stalin period [59], a similar transformation was never really possible in China, given the traditional independent role afforded China's intellectuals as moral-political scholars, subject to state patronage but also expected to play the role of state critic [60]. The movement for increased individual autonomy, influenced by freer market conditions from 1986 to 1989 was a logical consequence of this tradition, as was the resulting crackdown on the part of the state.

But unlike the more successful revolutions against party authoritarianism in Eastern Europe in 1989, student and intellectual demands for political reform were unsuccessful, in large part, because of the failure of key institutions including schools, to create a true civil society. Without the benefit of an independent church, labour unions, or truly free press, Chinese students and intellectuals forged linkages with other groups that offered the limited prospect of only symbolic resistance to government authority. The significant but circumscribed role of the educational process in contributing to demands for political reform can best be seen in terms of government policies that have attempted to regain party control of academic life in the aftermath of the Tiananmen massacre.

These efforts included jailing active intellectual dissidents, particularly those associated with the Academy of Social Sciences, shutting down the quasi-independent media, forcing college freshmen at elite universities to complete a year of military training, reasserting tighter control over job allocation procedures, initially restricting (but later loosening) study abroad and exchange activities, and increasing party surveillance over university governance. With the exception of economics and management fields, fewer applicants are being admitted into social science areas; strict political litmus tests have been implemented to screen out questionable candidates seeking to study humanities and social science subjects at graduate level [61]. In fact, dissertations written in the last 5 years are being scrutinised for political problems as a blacklist of academic work has begun to be compiled [62].

The success of these efforts is uneven; elite universities in Beijing have suffered the

greatest degree of state interference; other institutions have been more fortunate in deflecting efforts to control their operations. It is clear though, that educational institutions continue to be subjected to the pressures of external manipulation for political ends. One must also note the ease with which some intellectuals have embraced Singaporean and Taiwanese models of neo-authoritarianism, a stance that not only is accommodationist to current political realities, but leads one to question their degree of commitment to democratic reform [63].

In attempting to link issues of educational quality with the perpetuation of social inequalities, two basic questions need to be addressed. First, why is the acquisition of technical expertise inimical to the enhancement of mass, basic education which, which accompanying socialisation messages would appear to promote greater political inclusivity for all of China's inhabitants? Second, how do the normal curricular and instructional messages common to classroom situations at every level of the education system reify the inequalities of which we have spoken?

It is arguable whether mastery of technical expertise need inherently promote political and social inclusivity. Indeed, Chinese students who were active in the Tiananmen demonstrations showed how technological sophistication could be used to successfully communicate political messages to a mass audience through the use of computer networking and a sophisticated understanding of the electronic media. It has been further argued that during the late nineteenth century, the inclusion of science courses in basic education curricula on an international basis was viewed as a method of enhancing citizenship, as the skills they emphasised, rational calculation and deliberation, were viewed as contributing to an informed citizenry [64]. None the less, because the sciences and applied sciences are constructed so as to demand mastery of increasingly specialised knowledge areas that are hierarchically positioned, the human and material resources needed to facilitate such mastery are almost always limited, necessitating a selective allocation of these resources in developing world contexts. The political economy of technology transfer has compelled China to pay for increased access to advanced technology through aggressively marketing its exports globally, allowing regional economic inequality to increase while seeking increased foreign investment in favoured areas. Disparate educational investment in rural China follows these trends. Furthermore, the promise of obtaining immediate access to and acceptance into the international academic community has heightened pressures that exclusively allocate educational services and materials domestically to those in the best position to take advantage of those resources. In fact, the differential allocation of educational and social services is often rationalised according to criteria labelled as 'scientific'. The pervasive degree of gender inequality, evident at secondary and university levels is rationalised as reflecting women's natural and scientific inferiority [65]; in an even more extreme sense, periodic calls for eugenics campaigns offer a so-called scientific rationale for eliminating social burdens altogether [66].

However, in defining educational quality in terms of selectivity and exclusivity, China's education policy makers also articulate a view of modernity that is quite traditional, in line with historic predispositions that differentiated the importance of manual versus mental labour, argued in favour a strict demarcation between formal and alternative (*shuyuan*) learning, and reproduced a powerful intellectual elite through the implementation of the Confucian examination system. The cultivation of scientific and technical expertise today reaffirms these principles [67].

Curricular and instructional practices obviously play a crucial role in communicating educational mission and purpose. When children are denied the chance to attend any

school at all, they and their communities are placed in a dependent situation, relative to the conditions of more fortunate counterparts. When a standardised curriculum is implemented with insensitivity so as to mask the diverse conditions characterising learning environments throughout the country, teachers' and students' immediate sense of place is implicitly attacked. And, even if specialised curricula are developed for local schools, the failure to link local initiatives with broader priorities isolates and marginalises these efforts. In rural China in particular, the destruction of communal organisation and the inability of the township to command the degree of political authority afforded commune structures has contributed to an inconsistent commitment to schooling. But as horizontal trade linkages continue to develop between rural villages, breaking down rural isolation, awareness of place is also redefined in comparative terms. Sitting in a classroom may mean that one is writing characters instead of working on the family farm or enterprise, but it also means that one is now more aware of other schools in other villages operating in similar or different fashions, an awareness that also influences personal aspiration and educational commitment [68].

Finally, it is clear that curricular and instructional reform in China has influenced and in turn been influenced by changing views of professionalism that have become popular as the market economy has developed. The use of testing to support meritocratic metaphors, expansion in technical and vocational education at secondary and university levels, the introduction of positivism to the study of the social sciences and humanities attest to the ability of certain educational structures, particularly at the higher end of the education pyramid, to accommodate themselves to prevailing economic trends. The use of credit systems and short-term courses gives further evidence for their willingness to engage in the commodification of knowledge. Enhanced sensitivity to market can result in curricular innovation, but if too closely associated with short-term profit, it can also run the risk of damaging long-term institutional credibility. Chinese schools and universities increasingly face this risk as they are forced into expanding their entrepreneurial activities in order to maintain financial viability.

We know that there is a degree of cultural arbitrariness involved whenever certain subject areas are included or excluded from formal study; as Bourdieu notes, the systematic exclusion of any area of inquiry is in itself a form of symbolic violence [69]. It is also clear that schools, in selecting specific knowledge areas as being worthy of systematic study, communicate important messages concerning the values and priorities of the state. However, schools do more than simply reflect prevailing social, economic, and political trends, reinterpreting them in their own terms. The receipt of an education offers the possibility for personal and collective empowerment, particularly when the inconsistencies of what is accepted as conventional wisdom become so glaring as to demand change.

The basic incongruity affecting political, economic, and social relations in China today is the existence of state policy that encourages freer markets while restricting human rights and preserving political authoritarianism. The educational system also reflects this incongruity, serving the interests of traditional intellectual and newly emerging professional elites, while still perpetuating an inordinate degree of exclusivity and social inequality in both urban and rural environments. Definitions of educational quality and determinations of appropriate standards for educational progress continue to be defined according to these factors. Although educational policies are by no means solely responsible for the failure to create a true civil society in China, their failure to promote a greater degree of political inclusivity has ramifications for past and future attempts at initiating significant political reform. One would expect that even after the current

gatekeepers of party orthodoxy have been replaced with more pragmatic successors, social schisms between intellectual elites and workers and peasants will remain unbridgeable in the short term. Efforts to encourage the active participation of all of the relevant educational actors in the system would be a step in lessening that gap.

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NOTES

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- [2] FBIS-CHI-92-068, 'Space program unveiled' [OWo7o41 15092 Beijing, Xinhua, in English, 7 April 1992] (8 April 1992), p. 33.
- [3] FBIS-CHI-92-027, 'Anti-illiteracy campaign to target 20 million' [Beijing, *China Daily*, 7 February 1992, p. 1] (10 February 1992), pp. 25–26.
- [4] M. CARNOY & J. SAMOFF (1990) *Education and Social Transition in the Third World* (Princeton, Princeton University Press).
- [5] For a sensitive description of the role of schools in promoting distributive justice, see R. W. CONNELL, Citizenship, social justice and curriculum, an unpublished paper presented at the International Conference on Sociology of Education, Westhill, January 1992.
- [6] A. GIDDENS (1973, 1980) *The Class Structure of the Advanced Societies*, p. 105 (London: Hutchinson Publishing).
- [7] GIDDENS, op. cit., p. 105.
- [8] P. BOURDIEU & J.-C. PASSERON (1977) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (Beverly Hills, Sage).
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- [12] V. SHUE (1988) Honeycomb and web, in: *The Reach of the State*, pp. 134–135 (Stanford, Stanford University Press)
- [13] SHUE op. cit. pp. 137–147.
- [14] SHUE op. cit. pp. 147–152.
- [15] E. J. PERRY (1985) Rural violence in socialist China, *China Quarterly*, No. 103, pp. 414–440; on clientism see J. C. OI (1989) *State and Peasant in Contemporary China*, pp. 183–235 (Berkeley, University of California Press).
- [16] D. ZWEIG (1991) Internationalising China's countryside: the political economy of exports from rural industry, *China Quarterly*, No. 128, pp. 716–741.
- [17] D. J. SOLINGER (1991) The place of the central city in China's economic reform: from hierarchy to network, *City and Society*, 5(1), pp. 23–39.
- [18] The argument is made in W. L. PARISH & M. K. WHYTE (1978) *Village and Family Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press).
- [19] M. K. WHYTE (1974) *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley, University of California Press); for the bureaucratisation of urban life, see M. K. WHYTE & W. PARISH (1984) *Urban Life in Contemporary China* (Chicago, University of Chicago).
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- [23] PEPPER, op. cit., pp. 42–43, 51–53.
- [24] PEPPER, op. cit., pp. 75–77; PARISH & WHITE op. cit., pp. 78–85.
- [25] PEPPER, op. cit., pp. 1–6.
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- [28] CHENG, op. cit., p. 32.
- [29] CHENG, op. cit., p. 33.
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- [31] CHENG, op. cit., pp. 84–94.
- [32] H. KEMING, et al. (1989) Wo guo nongcun yiwu jiaoyu fazhan de huanjing xianzhuang he qianjing, *Jiaoyu Yanjiu*, No. 10, pp. 39–44.
- [33] It should be remembered that 'place' in Chinese terms continues to have association with ancestor residence.
- [34] S. THOGERSEN (1990) *Secondary Education in China After Mao: reform and social conflict*, pp. 104–105 (Aarhus, Denmark, Aarhus University Press).
- [35] A case in point is the Prairie Fire Campaign, designed to promote compliance with compulsory education directives throughout the countryside by improving co-ordination with all relevant administrative units. The role of the township is recognised as being extremely important in this regard but the degree to which local units are themselves given significant decision-making responsibilities is open to question.
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- [38] FBIS-CHI-92–019, "Prisons transformed into 'special schools'" [OW2401090392 Beijing, Xinhua, 24 January 1992], p. 39; FBIS-CHI-92–085, "Report on Jiangsu reform-through-labor teams" [Beijing, *Renmin Ribao*, 17 April 1992, p. 4] (1 May 1992), p. 22.
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- [40] H. ROSS (1991) The crisis in Chinese secondary schooling, in: Epstein op. cit., pp. 74–77; Y. XUEWEI, Kaoshi zhidu de zhongda gaige (A major reform of the examination system), *Jiaoyu Yanjiu*, No. 8, pp. 49–51.
- [41] See the translations of articles and reports in J. KWONG & KWAI FUN KO (Eds) (1991–92) Bu Zheng Zhi Feng: corruption in education, *Chinese Education*, 24(2).
- [42] ROSS, op. cit., p. 74.
- [43] PAINE & DELANY, op. cit. (1991).
- [44] Thogersen, op. cit. pp. 132–153.
- [45] In addition to ROSS, op. cit. pp. 86–92, see D. DAVIN (1991) The early childhood education of the only child generation in urban China, in: EPSTEIN, op. cit., pp. 42–65.
- [46] FBIS-CHI-92–009, "Juvenile delinquency, crime on increase" [OW1401031492 Beijing, Xinhua, 14 January 1992] (14 January 1992), pp. 27–28.
- [47] In addition to PAINE & DELANY, op. cit., see B. DELANY & L. PAINE (1991) Shifting patterns of authority in Chinese schools, *Comparative Education Review*, 35(1), pp. 23–43.
- [48] Phillip Schlecty differentiates various organizational roles students are expected to play in American schools: member, where allegiance to the institution is unconditionally demanded, client, where one picks and chooses the degree of one's allegiance to the institution, and/or product, where one's allegiance to the institution is minimal. Under the terms of his analysis, Chinese students would see themselves and would be viewed as institutional products, rather than members or clients. See P. SCHLECTY (1983) Teaching and social behavior, in: J. BALLANTINE, (Ed.) *Schools and Society*, pp. 155–170 (Mountain View, CA, Mayfield).
- [49] R. HAYHOE (1989) *China's Universities and the Open Door*, p. 44 (Armonk, NY, M. E. Sharpe).
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- [53] Rosen, op. cit., (1991) pp. 64–73.
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- [56] R. HAYHOE (1991) International exchanges: forces of political, cultural and educational change in China, paper delivered at the Conference on Chinese Education for the 21st Century, Honolulu, 19–22 November.
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- [59] See S. FITZPATRICK (1978) Cultural, revolution as class war, in: S. FITZPATRICK, *Cultural Revolution in Russia: 1928–1931*, pp. 8–40 (Bloomington, Indiana University Press); and G. KONRAD & I. SZELENYI (1991) Intellectuals and domination in post-Communist societies, in: P. BOURDIEU & J. COLEMAN (Eds) *Social Theory for a Changing Society* (Boulder, Westview), where the authors argue that intellectuals in Eastern Europe will be able to maintain their power by overseeing a balance between members of the bureaucracy and newly emerging petit bourgeois elements in post-Communist societies.
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- [61] FBIS-CHI-002, “Education commission sets admissions guidelines” [OW2912195091 Beijing, Xinhua, 27 December 1991] (3 January 1992), p. 35.
- [62] FBIS-CHI-92–010 “Academic works ‘blacklist’ reportedly compiled” [Hong Kong AFP, 15 January 1992] (15 January 1992), p. 18.
- [63] B. SAUTMAN (1992) Sirens of the strongman: neo-authoritarianism in recent Chinese political theory, *China Quarterly*, No. 129, pp. 72–102.
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- [67] R. Price notes, for example, that when offered, science education in China begins at the junior secondary level, and is taught with deference to traditional and formalistic disciplinary boundaries. R.F. PRICE (1990) School science and ‘modernization’, in: BIH-JAW LIN & LI-MIN FAN (Eds) *Education in Mainland China*, pp. 152–171 (Taipei, Institute of International Relations).
- [68] A sensitive plea to consider the ramifications of defining sense of place within the American classroom is offered by P. THEOBALD (1992) The concept of place in the new sociology of education, *Educational Foundations*, 6(1), pp. 5–20.
- [69] BOURDIEU & PASSERON, op. cit., pp. 31–32, 67.