The Rise of Higher Education and The Chinese Middle Class

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Introduction

The middle class has taken its place in many parts of China, although averaging around the urban inhabitants. (Li, 2010) Despite its proportion, many economists have highlighted the significance of the middle class and its position in China’s economy and development. In particular, their involvement in China’s budding higher education persists to be correlated. Many scholars underline that higher education in China has altered dramatically since the economic era into a consumer grounded commodity rather than a public good. (Chan, Ngok, & Phillips, 2008) In pursuit of fairness, competitiveness and international standards, universities have advanced to meet the demands of the newfound generation. The circumstances resulted in the universities’ ever-rising ranks on platforms worldwide where the esteemed Tsinghua University that is said to have surpassed MIT in the engineering arena. (Sonmez, 2015) The presence of the urban middle-class, driven by the need to equip themselves with relevant qualifications and skills, has encouraged enrollment rates to sky-high which the Minister of Education announces to increase additional ten percent during the course of the next decade. (Lin & Sun, 2010) However, the consequences of such unparalleled increase become entangled with China’s social organization that is influencing relationships between the allocation of class and education. Thus, this literature review seeks to (a) disentangle the function of education and class and China’s educational reforms, (b) draw out the destabilizing highlights of the urban middle class in relation to the privatization of educational institutions and (c) elaborate the impacts and the definition of middle class. In recent literatures, scholars have neglected the emphasis on the urban middle class and commercialization of education, by and large devoting more scholarship on the changing dynamics of educational institutions. However, this paper will bridge the affairs
between the two through content analyses and comparison across various literatures to discover the pertinent association. Therefore, this produces the question, “How has the expansion of higher education in China, in relation to economic advancement, have an effect on the urban middle class?” Thus, this paper attempts to unveil some of the literature behind the various ideas in hope to shed some light on the matter.

**Correlation between Class and Education**

The magnitude of education to class has been studied in notable aspect by writers such as Harold Kerbo and Bourdieu whose concept of cultural capital (i.e. education) that can propel one forward in the class classification. (Kerbo, 1991) (Bourdieu, 1986) Hence, tertiary education is regularly considered as the means to achieve higher ranks into the middle class. Lin and Sun have remarked this trend in China’s middle class order as well. In Hoffman’s piece, she describes the shift under Deng’s era where education was valued once more after the Cultural Revolution and this restructured the employment opportunities in China. (Hoffman, 2010) Educated citizens were now able to join the economy and it paved way for those from lower classes to progress to the middle class who continued to place emphasis on education. Such ‘social engineering’ can be viewed in Tomba’s research where education qualifications situate deeply to one’s class and salary. (Tomba, 2004) Therefore, we can see the constant dissemination of the substance on education in relation to one’s class and subsequently we will study how the middle class preserves their status through education.
Educational Reforms

Some works have observed on the sequential educational adjustments aligning with China’s incorporation into the global economy and this aids in establishing the foundation on which we can study the advancement of higher education with the progression of its people. Mok’s paper provides the necessary linkage between the impacts of globalization and the influence of global institutions to reveal China’s conversion from the Soviet Union’s model to a more privatized structure following its economic improvements in the 1970s. (Hao, 1998) Various approaches included restructuring (huazhuan), joint development (gongjian), mergers (hebing) and cooperation (hezuo) in the framework delivered by CCP in 1993. (Mok, 2005) Similarly, Crabb highlighted the support of the government in globalization for education which “opened the door” for the reappearance of commercial partners. (Crabb, 2010) Another perspective to view the scholastic reforms also stemmed from the realization that the government was unable to support extensive demand for educational facilities financially. Therefore, Chan Ngok and Philip explain such drifts and thus the government’s adoption of decentralization and employment of market forces to fulfill the need of the masses. (Chan, Ngok, & Phillips, 2008) These longitudinal studies have given comprehensive background on how China achieves her foresight to enhance its citizens to meet the necessities of the country and take action appropriately.

Privatization for People and Profit

As the government continues to endorse the privatization of the educational structures, () notes the forthcoming manifestation of concepts such as the ‘campus inc’ and ‘academic
capitalization’ displayed in modern-day universities across the globe that China appears to be following the footsteps of. (Mok, 2005) In several discussions, a handful of authors examined the characteristics of capitalism in higher education that the government aspired to eradicate minor establishments and recuperate the ‘economies of scale’. (Wang, 2000) Such comprised of the merger of Peking University with Beijing Medical University in 2000 that enlarged the school’s intake. (Lin & Sun, 2010) By moving away from the ‘interventionist state model’ to ‘deregulated state model’ and ‘acceleration state model’ of marketization, a larger group of the masses was able to penetrate the education sector. (Mok, 2005) Crabb, who accentuates the plight of middle class families, adds on to the idea of ‘campus inc’ by revealing the sprouting of private institutions known as ‘minban xuexiao’ accommodating to the new middle class that for profit. (Crabb, 2010) Thus, these literatures aid in forming a context for the consumers of the contemporary ‘people-run’ education industry and how the urban middle class are able to perpetuate their interests in the emergent for-profit higher education institutions.

**Inequalities Effects**

The following sources shed light on the bearings that the rapid expansion in higher education has brought about, consisting of the swell on the educational benchmark of the middle class and inequalities surfaced. They disclose that expansion policies have ensued in an excessive stratification in acquiring education together with vast wealth discrepancies. This educational inequality is elaborated in Agelasto and Adamson’s text together with Ngok and Kwong’s in which education stands as a commodity that is payable in China. (Agelasto & Adamson, 1998) (Ngok & Kwong, 2003) University tuition fees have risen up to the effect that
those who originate from better-off families stand to gain while those from the lesser struggle to access education means. In addition, other scholars have mentioned the differentiation in education expansion found in diverse regions of China. (e.g. coastal counterparts with higher expansion). (Chan, Mok, & Tang, 2004) This demonstrates to us, that the urban middle classes were more capable to access education due to their geographical localization. A few sociologists have called this the ‘fractured’ (duanlie) society, which is portrayed through the way the upper and middle class reside in superior facilitated environments than others although all resides in the same place. (Rosen, 2004) Through this analysis, we are able to ascertain the various inequities with regards to societal space and education access.

**Competitiveness and Uncertainty for Future**

While many scholars naturally assume that the urban middle class benefit from higher education development, some academics have argued the opposite. They propose that instead of gaining, the urban middle class faces more educational competition than before. Undergraduates and graduates are gradually finding it hard to earn a decent salary in Zhang’s research paper. (Zhang, 2009) Furthermore, a university’s reputation becomes a prerequisite that future employers identified and can be observed in the choice of ‘on-campus’ fairs. (Hoffman, 2010) With the state shifting its financial responsibility onto the individuals, middle class families now encounter grander educational expenditure for their children. The syndrome of the famous ‘one child policy’ has caused families to invest heavily into their only child’s education, which translates to their future. (Anagnost, 2004) Thus, such literatures broaden the perspective that
competition in educational resources is still prevalent in urban regions and the marketization of it has allowed the more prosperous middle class to contrive the education scheme.

**Demystifying the Chinese Middle Class**

Lastly, writings on the Chinese middle class remain to be essential for this subject as many stakeholders embraced different definitions of the middle class. In Li’s Characterizing China’s Middle Class, she reflects the three main outlooks of middle class that is consulted through the lens of the public, the government and sociologists. (Li, 2010) The angle that this paper would focus on would be that of the sociologists that are delineated based on various conditions to produce a more accurate insight. Conversely, even within the sociologists’ definitions, there are still incongruences in calculating its size of 4 to 25 percent. (Li, 2010) Yet, some scholars such as Lin Chun contend that the middle class in China is an obscure, ‘fluid’ category and would be represented rather as a sub-part of the working class than anything substantial. (Chun, 2014) Nevertheless, this paper hinges on the existence of the middle class in China. Li terms the new middle class members as entrepreneurs (capitalist class), experts, directors and governmental bureaucrats while the old middle class members include small commerce vendors, self-employed and the white-collar workers. It is supposed by researchers that the new middle class commonly hold high educational standards and is predicted to be the catalysts for loftier educational expansion. (Lin & Sun, 2010) Thus, these journals assist in clarifying the direction of the objective of this paper and the constitution of the middle class make up.
Conclusion

In conclusion, this literature review prides itself in various sections that is connected to the education dynamic in China and its consumers. While much attachment has been allocated to the idea of quality in China’s tertiary education, changing growth and external parties have resulted in a remarkable development that can be both advantageous and detrimental to China’s economy. The role of education stays as a significant avenue for those who wish to climb the class ladder. Yet with the effects of globalization, marketization and commercialization built upon the government’s behalf, higher education has transformed itself in terms of its access to the masses, production of future laborers and class. As commented in the literatures above, some of the middle class appears to stumble upon setbacks when striving to access higher education. Although the assumptions are clear for those at the extreme end of classes, the slowly increasing middle class hitherto has been seemingly unable to recognize itself amidst the disparity. The middle class has always been perceived to be ‘better off’ than those who are completely off the chart but are often caught in the middle. When and how will they be able to rise up to greater heights of the much-needed education without compensating on their communal life? This is one answer that will be in continual discourse between the power relations and class struggles.

Bibliography


