Contradictions within the Hegemonic Meritocratic Discourse and Post Reform Era Education

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Literature Review

Introduction

The role of education for social mobility is a particularly interesting area for research. It is fascinating to see how it has been influenced and shaped in the light of constant and vigorous social and economic changes to contemporary China. Despite it all, meritocracy has remained the legitimizing link between education and social mobility. I seek to critically examine the hegemonic nature of meritocracy within the current quality education discourse. I begin my task by showing how the hegemonic meritocratic logic has been subject to various forms of external influence, thus transforming it. Following that, using a sociopolitical perspective, I seek to synthesize the research achievements showing how this hegemonic meritocratic logic keeps hidden the mechanisms that reproduce educational inequality within the contemporary education system, standing in the way of this vertical social mobility when it is supposed to be the vehicle that makes social mobility possible.

Hegemonic Meritocratic Logic

Dating back to pre modern times, with the institutionalization of the more or less meritocratic keju examinations, education has served to create hierarchy in Chinese society through two inner dimensions. (Yang, 2014) The first is a utilitarian dimension which links educational qualifications to materialistic and worldly success. Through an understanding of elitism in education presented by Yang we can begin to conceptualize the hegemonic meritocratic logic (Yang, 2016). It operates by affording symbolic and material privileges to a select stratum of students who by their brilliance and conscientiousness reach the top while the others are relegated to lesser positions without such privileges. This elitism is thought to be meritocratic
because access to that elite status is asserted to be open by those involved in education such as the school authorities, parents and students. Woronov stands in agreement that despite this being an extremely narrow and unilinear life course path, the ‘hegemonic understanding of university admissions as the minimum basis for children’s upward mobility, as well as the related notion of child as laboring at school work, are deeply naturalized, as are the structures and systems that support them’ (2011).

However as we will see in subsequent paragraphs, ‘individual brilliance’ and ‘conscientiousness’ are not the only things at work, cultural capital for example is also present but less visible ‘because it is thus linked in numerous ways to the person in his biological singularity and is subject to a hereditary transmission which is always heavily disguised, or even invisible’ (Bourdieu, 1986)

The second dimension is a moralistic one where academic accomplishments are associated with self worth and honour. This is furthered by how status groups cohere around test scores as ‘different test score results sort young people into differentially honored status groups (‘Woronov, 2011.’) With both dimensions we see how the hegemonic meritocratic logic has been so internalized and naturalized over time that it can be used to dictate an individuals honour or value.

Educational Inequality

1) Macropolitical Changes

The research I have reviewed each reveal some historical context to meritocracy when discussed it within contemporary education reform. (Hong, 2013, Deng and Treiman, 1997 Wu, 2008 Yang, 2014 and Woronov, 2011) This makes it clear to the readers, that this concept is not new to the Chinese education system, however it is influenced by the other changes surrounding it. Both Hong and Deng and Triman illustrate the way macropolitical
changes can have an influence on the life chances of citizens. While Deng and Treiman’s article focuses on how macropolitical changes during the Cultural Revolution affected the relationship between family origin and educational attainment, Hong’s article shows how macropolitical changes during the Mao and Deng leaderships and its changes to the economic policy resulted in changes in people’s behavior and perspective. While the examination mechanism in society today can be thought of as more meritocratic, success in the examination means immediate appointment when that was not the case during the Tang dynasty, the moral degradation of individuals during this transition to Deng’s economic reforms renders this system no longer sufficient to appoint officials and hence the government recently proposed measures for ethical screening in the Guo kao however no formal policies have been put in place. This changes the dominant meritocratic logic of these examinations because by adding a moral assessment component, with the subjective nature of accessing morals, opens up the possibility of a back door for corrupt promotions (Hong, 2013). Deng and Treiman found that state policy that favoured peasants and workers in order to equalize the starting points and hence was inherently not meritocratic was able to considerably weaken the link between social origin and educational attainment. Despite the system not being meritocratic, the meritocratic logic of premodern society never vanished because it is still used to judge whether or not the Cultural Revolution is meritocratic. Furthermore, Wu whose research preceded Deng and Treiman, had similar findings when it came to ‘the relationship between family origins and educational attainment (and how it) has been shaped by the changing political processes and state policies in different historical periods of socialist China’; she however found that even during the “Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), when state policies disfavored the elites (cadres and professionals) and highbrow culture, cultural capital still significantly raised the odds of entering junior high school.” (Wu, 2008) Due to the differences in data collection and focus, this is one inconsistency between the two
readings that requires further investigation. In the event that cultural capital still played a part, it would imply the intense privilege cultural capital bestows on the carrier that even during a period that explicitly tried to stomp all traces of it out, it still had a place in reproducing educational inequality and has never been separated from contradicting the meritocratic logic that has existed.

Both Hong and Deng and Treiman’s articles are useful to conceptualize the intimate relationship state policies have on influencing the individual’s life chances and behavior within a socialist state.

2) Cultural Capital

From Fei’s paper, we are introduced to this concept of cultural capital when she illustrated how professor’s children (or children of the sent down youth) can recognize characters quicker than rural children because they have been brought up in an environment where they are always exposed to them however these children cannot catch grasshoppers the way rural children can for similar reasons. (Fei, 1992) However the education system sees one skill as more valuable than the other. This leads nicely into Wu’s findings that cultural capital, plays a very important role on one’s educational attainment. It has marked significantly positive effects on children’s educational attainment over time, especially for transitions to the junior and senior high school levels, and for transition to college during the post-Maoist era (Wu, 2008). This find is useful to bring forth the point that the education system has never been meritocratic (according to the hegemonic meritocratic logic) because cultural capital, previously explained earlier (under the headline hegemonic meritocratic logic) has always been hidden within the system, influencing the starting points towards educational attainment and social mobility.
Wu’s adaption of Bourdieu’s cultural capital concept to the Chinese society by focusing on cultural forms (cultural resources and practices) at home, makes her approach appropriate because in both traditional and socialist China, education has remained limited and highly competitive and as a result, the family always plays an important role in helping children make progress in school and are well prepared for examinations. This can also be seen from Kim and Fong’s research on parents helping children with their homework. These parents have internalized the meritocratic logic that education will lead to social mobility and this is passed on to their children when they see the level of commitment these parents put into ensuring their child gets a good education. However with that said, majority of the parents Fong researched lacked the ability to provide assistance higher than primary school apart from one parent who was a teacher and had higher education (Fong and Kim, 2013). The cultural capital of that particular child can be seen as invaluable because of how uncommon it is. The admission rates when the universities first reopened in 1977, was 4.8% (Hong, 2013). Parents of children in school at the time of the research are part of this group when higher education was more limited than it is today, making the cultural capital distribution correspondingly divided.

3) Economic Capital

With the privatization and commodification of education, economic capital has come to play an increasingly larger role in educational inequality. Both Hong and Walder raised the notion that communist party membership during the Mao period and education are qualitatively different credentials that lead to different paths of social prestige. Walder advanced a dual path model and examined it with 2 sampling surveys. (1990) The 1986 Tianjin survey shows that individuals with superior education move into a professional elite of high social prestige while individuals with both educational credential and party membership enter an
administrative elite with social prestige, authority and material privileges. (Walder, 1990)

Furthermore in Hong’s paper on the childrearing values on sociodemographic variables in China, her findings when looking at the level of education showed that although the high educational levels of cadres/managers is consistent with occupational mobility theory and previous research, the low educational attainment of Chinese foremen/supervisors is not. This is a consequence of social stratification in communist societies where career advancement depends not just educational credentials but on political loyalty as well. While individuals with both are place in top-level administrative positions, individuals who lack educational credentials but show outstanding political credentials are appointed as middle or lower level managerial staff (foremen and supervisors). It is useful to read Hong’s paper in relation to Walder’s because Walder suggests this dual track to social mobility while Hong shows how parents who underwent the dual track to social prestige have differing childrearing values and in turn different cultural capital when raising their children (Hong, 2001). From these findings and the operationalized criteria of cultural capital Wu suggests, the managerial class may also lack the cultural capital advantage that the top level administrative class may enjoy in education however they have economic capital.

Crabb and Yang both describe how the increasingly affluent socioeconomic elites can use their economic capital to their advantage by exercising their privilege to choose educational institutions and educational tools such as extracurricular activities or additional lessons for their child. With privatized education, there is unequal distribution of resources, children from families who can afford to pay for the best get the best, while those who cannot must settle for what is assigned to them, making the link between education and social mobility unmeritocratic. Yang’s research of how this privilege creeps into the public school system is poignant. He describes how the key senior middle school he studied, offered an International
Programme tied to an American high school that cost 80000 yuan a year when the others in the mainstream system paid less than 2000 yuan. Furthermore, students who did the International Programme had a lower point cut off in the Zhong kao than those in the normal system and they would not have to sit for the Gao kao and hence escape the vigorous preparation leading up to it. (Yang, 2015) Crabb’s research is interesting because she focused on the emotional costs of having this economic capital and hence this decision to make. Coupled with the One Child Policy, where the one child was the ‘Only Hope’ for the parents, making the decision as to what school would be most advantages for the child proved difficult (Crabb, 2010). As these parents did not have the same opportunities as they can now provide for their child, all the more they want to make the best decision they can. Furthermore, as a shift from centrally planned to market supplied, there is a shift from reliance on the state to reliance on the family and all the more pressure is added due to this privilege of being offered a choice. While these children are privileged with a back up in the event they are ‘lazy’ or do not work as hard, for the other children who do not possess the economic capital that allows them a choice, it is do or die. (Crabb, 2010)

However, from Yang’s (2016) and Woronov’s (2011) research we still see the students buying into this meritocratic logic. Albeit it is easier for students in Yang’s research to accept this logic because of the fact that they are in a key public school, the first step on their way to getting into a good university and then on to getting a good job, the vocational school students in Woronov’s research, also possess this aspirational aspect towards social mobility that the meritocratic logic promises them. ‘The students and their parents had thus internalized the hegemonic ideology of producing better urban citizens through increasing education, regardless of the quality of the education itself’ (Woronov, 2011). This shows that in every strata, not just at the top, is the hegemonic meritocratic logic internalized. Through this one
can understand how universal educational reform and compulsory education can exist in a country as geographically big and diverse with 56 ethnic groups.

Conclusion

With the synthesis of various contradictions inherent in the post reform era education system that operates on the hegemonic meritocratic logic, we still see how there persists an aspirational quality that holds on to the belief that education is the path to social mobility. One respondent in Yang’s research said ‘in our system, even a genius has to bow in front of the diligent’ and this makes evident how the meritocratic system puts the responsibility on the individual for their success or failure when in actuality, there are numerous processes influencing this result however there is a lack of the interpretive, empirical research for how this is carried out (2016)
References


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