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China's Quality Education and Homeschooling

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Over the past decade, China’s education system has come under spotlight due to its numerous curriculum reforms at all levels within its system, and in acknowledging China’s significance in managing and affecting the largest national population globally (Wiseman & Huang 2011). Most notably, the previous (and arguably, heavily criticized) examination-oriented front of China’s education system has seen the necessitated shift away from qualification focus to one of education for quality (suzhi jiaoyu). Yet, the efficacies of such educational reforms have been highly debatable, and it is for this reason that this paper seeks to dive into the contention in understanding China’s contemporary educational institution within suzhi jiaoyu.

As Wiseman & Huang (2011:5) notes, past scholarship and research on China’s reforms have centred on “education governance”, “marketization and educational finance”, “teaching and teacher preparation”, “assessment and testing”, “special-needs education and equity”, “creativity development”, and “higher education”, whereas a more recent field targets on the resistance that such reforms have faced. Moreover, education research can also be dichotomized as those from within China, where focus is on education reforms and China’s modernization efforts, and externally, where education reforms are seen rather as historical moments and in relation to wider international trends (Wiseman & Huang 2011).

This paper seeks to add on to the field of research of the former. Of particular interest are claims that homeschooling, though illegal under China’s 1986 compulsory basic education law, have been a marginal but growing resistance against China’s mainstream education. Although current numbers of children being homeschool are low (in 2003, about 2000 of China’s more than 1 billion population), Beijing-based NGO 21st-Century Education Research Institute’s survey found that some 18,000 parents expressed interest in joining the homeschooling trend, citing discontentment with conventional education’s curriculum and
pedagogic style (Lin 2013; Jin 2013; Lee 2014). Herein, the dominant concern of this research hence is in investigating China’s homeschooling trend, in contrast to the country’s conventional educational shift toward *suzhi jiaoyu*.

With this *cause célèbre* in mind, this paper narrows the vast literature of China’s reforms to focusing on China’s reforms within its basic level education system. Unlike the ages of higher education, home-schooling usually begins with children at a young age, and hence this paper notes that reviewing literature on China’s quality education should highlight those that were based on basic level education, and leave higher educational levels out.

By way of exposition, this paper will first provide some succinct but necessary background on quality education in relation to China’s education reforms. It will then review existing debates on the effectiveness of schools in China in implementing quality education, and lastly, to highlight recent findings on China’s homeschool phenomena.

**China’s Education Reforms Background**

A distinct feature of China’s education is its emphasis on qualification. Since the 80s following the shift from the Cultural Revolution, China’s education system underwent numerous intentional measures to establish a universalized education. Here, China’s basic education underwent three phases of reform: (i) basic standardization of primary school education (1980-1985); (ii) the basic formulation of nine-year compulsory education (1986-2000); and (iii) the overall standardization of nine-year compulsory education across China (2001-2008) — significantly improving the overall quality of its citizenry (Xin & Kang 2012). Under compulsory education, every child is conferred the right for basic education, which is centrally governed by the CCP (Guan & Meng 2007).
However, one main complication that researchers highlighted within China’s education institution was the pre-eminence placed on knowledge, examination and qualification results (Law 2014; Xiao & Li 2013; Li & Li 2010). With limited educational resources, partiality by both state and citizenry was conferred to schools of elite positioning (Law 2014; Xin & Kang 2012; Li & Li 2010). Scholastic advances that were qualified through knowledge examinations became the sole indicator of a child’s performance (Xin & Kang 2012). Much research also noted the compounding of China’s unique One Child Policy and its opening up to marketization, thereby intensifying China’s qualification-oriented competition with far-reaching social implications, scilicet, lesser propensity for innovation (Li & Li 2010), unequal treatment on students (Xin & Kang 2012; Chen, Chu & Zhao 2011), corruption (Xiao & Li 2013), and student abuse cases (Lin 2013).

Concomitantly, efforts were raised to deter the adverse ramifications. Since 1998, measures have been placed to gradually discard unified examinations within basic education levels (Xin & Kang 2012). Prominently, two initiatives for education reform were subsequently implemented — “21st Century Action Plan for Invigorating Education” in 1998 and “Decisions on Deepening Education Reform and promoting Quality Education” in 1999 (Li & Li 2010; Guan & Meng 2007). Notably, the latter policy enlisted the establishment of China’s New National Curriculum Reform (CNNCR), with the goals of developing patriotism, cultural traditions, maintaining China’s socialist democratic system, foster moral values and ethics, innovation, health, and lifelong learning (Guan & Meng 2007:585-586).

The policy of suzhi jiaoyu was intervened as a counteraction to the exam-oriented culture (Crabb 2010). Since the 1990s, suzhi jiaoyu became a common neologism used by educators
with the consented intention to raise the all-round development of a child’s quality (Xin & Kang 2012; Woronov 2009). Operationally, the all-round development of children could be qualified under the categories of intellect (zhì), physical (tì), aesthetic (meì), and morally (de) (Chen et al 2011; Woronov 2009), and steers educational processes away from rote learning pedagogies to one that promotes creativity and cultural values (Crabb 2010). In 2001, the Ministry of Education further refined the suzhi jiaoyu to encompass a “three-dimensional objective,” scilicet, in attaining good knowledge and skills, understanding methods and process, and lastly for attitudinal development (Li & Ni 2012; Zhong 2006)

Debates Surrounding Quality Education
Past research on the effectiveness of quality education have been debatable. On the one hand, researchers have highlighted China’s wider societal factors impinging upon the effective implementation of quality education.

Li & Li (2010) argues that the rising and visible manifestations of resistance should be attributed to China’s still prevalent examination-oriented education culture, pressures from the One Child Policy, and China’s opening up to market environment. Citing China’s history since the Sui Dynasty, Li & Li (2010:212) argues that the extension of the “Imperial Exam System” for more than 1300 years have brought about deep-seeding effects to Chinese culture — emphasizing on textual learning instead of practice, cursory memorization as opposed to innovation, and competitive grades. Compounded with the effects of having the only child and the push for economic mobility, students and schools are pressured to focus more on the education for qualifications (Li & Li 2010; Crabb 2012). Similarly, Ryan et al (2009) notes the still prevalent dominance of China’s examination culture as a deterrence to reform, and the study by Chen et al (2011) highlights how school principals are caught
between the desired implementation of quality and the existing pressures of the schools’ measures achievement.

Although such researches have mainly focused on external factors in the attribution of the limitations to quality education, recent research have howbeit found interesting complications within the curriculum itself that infringes on the efficacy of quality education instead. As noted by Li & Ni (2012), Wang’s (2004) research for instance questions the three-dimensional objectives of quality education. By critically examining the notion that China’s education system has placed an overemphasis on information/knowledge transmission, Wang, Sun, and Liu (2005) have found that information transmission of knowledge has not been scrutinized enough, which deflates the effective implementation of the first of the three-dimensional objective of quality education.

However, Li & Ni (2012) also acknowledged researchers on the opposing end contending that China’s suzhi jiaoyu have indeed been effective in defining academic knowledge information, in applying knowledge to real life, and in priming knowledge as part of personal experience rather than limiting it to mere academia. For instance, Zhong and You (2004) argue that the three-dimensional approach of China’s educational reform has made leaps in developing learning skills that reconcile knowledge with culture, a huge contrast in comparison to the previous one-dimensional emphasis on the knowledge transmission.

In contrary however, Li & Ni (2013) also highlights both Yu’s (2005) and Wang’s (2006) studies, having found that actual implementation of the tripartite objectives have in fact deviated away from its origin implementation goals. For example, teachers were found to have neglected proper knowledge and skill transmission in attempt to achieve the following
two of the three-dimensional objectives. Additionally, Yu (2005) and Wang (2006) further question the process of building attitudinal development (the third objective), having found that teachers who deviate from the ideal teaching processes to find alternative but rigid ways of attitudinal development.

Woronov’s (2009) study on the discourses and practices of *suzhi jiaoyu* in Beijing further highlights the complications in conducting such quality-oriented education. Woronov found that the state’s delimiting of the concept of *suzhi* has been highly contradictory. In the bids of raising educational efforts to moral quality, teachers have noted the pedagogical complications of reconciling kids to historical pedagogical styles of *suzhi* in the past with the actual *suzhi* in the contemporary present. Significantly, Woronov notes that *suzhi* requires traditional socialist qualities of grit even during tribulation. Yet, China’s national market development paradoxically demands the construction of a self that consumes in immediate gratification to market commodities. Noted one of the teachers interviewed by Woronov, failure in teaching *suzhi* “happens a lot in Morality Class: the way the kids and their parents live isn’t always the way the book expects them to” (2009:575).

**China’s Homeschool**

In recent years, homeschooling in China has been gaining ground in news both within China and internationally as an alternative to China’s mainstream education (Jin 2013; Lin 2013; Teo 2013; Lee 2014). Though illegal in theory (Lee 2014; Sheng 2014), Lee (2014) notes the recent small but growing trend of homeschooling due to structural loopholes within China’s compulsory education policies, hence seeing more parents unschooling their children from mainstream education platforms to homeschooling. Sheng (2014) notes that existing literature on homeschooling have been largely ignored in China, possibly due to the strong parental
discontentment towards conventional schooling, and the links of religious beliefs and values to homeschooling pedagogy. Moreover, the few existing literature surrounding China’s homeschool phenomena largely focuses on deterministic social backgrounds that aid in the choice for homeschooling, as well as the parents’ motivations for homeschool.

According to Crabb (2012), China’s reforms and opening up of its education institution to market-driven commoditization have fuelled the rise of an urban middle-class culture of school-choice consumerism. Sheng’s (2015) study on homeschooling in Shanghai takes this middle-class social implication to account of the rise in parents’ varietal choices to their children’s education, which concomitantly led to the rise of the homeschooling phenomenon, notably in major cities such as Beijing and Shanghai.

For Sheng (2014; 2015), parents’ motivations for homeschooling lie in the perceived issues that conventional schools provide. In interviewing students under “Meng Mu Tang”, a widely known homeschool in Shanghai, parents lament conventional schools’ preeminent culture of examination and grades, which is perceived to neglect the proper care in grooming their children’s interests and learning needs (Sheng 2015). Moreover, Sheng’s study in (2014) likewise found the same rhetoric, with parents believing as well that a “better education” could be secured through homeschooling (Sheng 2014:56).

Additionally, Sheng (2015) also noted that parents have stressed on values and culture as legitimate reasons for choosing homeschool. For the parents studied in Meng Mu Tang, most parents saw and desired the good values system found in Confucian teachings, a traditional pedagogy ignored by mainstream schools. In fact, parents have defined such values and
culture to be qualities that are deemed important for their children, which rationalized the discontent for China’s mainstream education (Sheng 2015).

Moreover, Sheng’s (2014; 2015) literature also reveal how the pedagogic styles of homeschools places children at the centre, whilst the teacher supports flexibly customize teaching content to the learning capabilities and personalities of the child. Sheng’s (2015) study highlights such pedagogy styles to be a main attribute for homeschooling, wherein the concentrated care and effort to the individual child would provide better teaching and motivation to learning — as opposed to learning for grades — which in turn improves results.

Conclusion

Intriguingly, the comparison between research on quality education within China’s mainstream education institution vis-à-vis homeschools in China brings under spotlight the unique discourses on what signifies quality education from both stakeholders. For one, mainstream school institutions have over the decade made numerous reforms and refinements to the pedagogy and curriculum. Of importance in the implementation of quality education (suzhi jiaoyu) is the focus on intellect, health, morals and aesthetics, along with the three-dimensional objectives of knowledge, learning process, and attitudinal development to aid children in holistic all-round development. Yet, present literatures have featured the challenges to such reforms, citing both Chinese cultural contexts and the difficulties of applying quality education’s goals into actual pedagogy. Most notably, the recent literature highlighting homeschooling in China have provided evidence to the Chinese public’s prevailing discontentment with China’s education despite its reforms towards “quality education”. Yet, it also highlights the gap in specifically qualifying how and why homeschooling parents have not amicably received state efforts for reform.
References:


