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ARTICLE

# China's Path to Achieve World-Class Education

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With the reform movement in 1978, the Chinese government began to make great efforts to develop its country's education. Xi Jinping's administration has continued these efforts, attempting to achieve a world-class education system by 2020. This paper will examine the accomplishments of the Chinese education system in the post-Mao era, and discuss the gap between the current status of Chinese education and the requirements of a world-class education, ultimately arguing that there is still a big gap between a Chinese education and the most advantaged education systems in the world. To establish a globalized educational system, build world-class universities, and train internationally recognized Chinese scholars, this paper suggests that it is necessary for China to scrutinize and reshape its educational philosophy, since a philosophy of education is the guiding principle for any country to achieve the goal of providing its citizens with a world-class education.

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**Keywords:** Chinese Education; Chinese politics; China Dream; Chinese modernization; Educational Philosophy

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Education is the most powerful force for cultivating human capital and promoting modernization. China is becoming a regional power and will significantly influence the future of the world, and since “education can enhance human capital, increase the individual's productivity and contribute to economic development” (Wang 2011, 213–229) the country's future will be largely determined by its education system. China has vowed to enhance its comprehensive power and fulfill its “China Dream”—the rejuvenation of the Chinese nation—by using education as the primary mechanism for modernizing China. The Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020) declares that China will achieve a world-class education system by 2020. This paper will examine the accomplishments of the Chinese education system in the post-Mao era, and discuss the gap between the current status of Chinese education and the requirements of a world-class education by addressing the following questions: Shanghai topped the ranking for the 2013 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in all categories, so why have Chinese universities been excluded from the ranking of the 20 best universities in the world? With college enrollment expanding in China, why do one third of graduates say that university study is not worthwhile? Why do more than 30% of college graduates in China fail to secure a job upon graduation? China is getting richer and richer, so why do Chinese intellectuals keep leaving the motherland for developed countries? Why do many students become outstanding only after they have gone overseas to study? This paper will argue that although China has had great success in education in the post-Mao era, there is still a big gap between a Chinese education and the most advantaged education systems in the world. China's education system does not yet match the demands of modernization and faces unprecedented challenges on its path towards becoming world-class. A philosophy of education is the guiding principle for any country to achieve the goal of providing its citizens with a world-class education. It is necessary, therefore, for China to scrutinize its educational philosophy in order to establish a globalized educational system, build world-class universities, and train internationally recognized Chinese scholars.

## Can China Accommodate the Core Tenet of Modern Education?

Confucianism was at the center of education in China from the Han Dynasty (B.C. 221–206) until 1905. Although the New Culture Movement (1910s–1920s) began to criticize Confucianism, the basic ideas of Confucius still play a role in Chinese education today. The educational goal for Confucius was twofold: to cultivate individuals, and to serve politics. The transformation of the masses (*jiao hua*) and the cultivation of talent for office (*yu cai*) were the major functions of ancient Chinese education (Borthwick 1983). These two tasks were interrelated, but cultivating individuals was the precondition for nurturing talented people who could then run for public office and shape the social order. Contrary to Daoism, Confucianism did not teach people to pessimistically flee from the real world. Instead, Confucius taught that people should devote themselves to society. The ultimate purpose of education was to serve one's community, government, and emperor. Hence political education is one of the core areas of Confucian educational thought, and Confucian political teachings strongly emphasize loyalty—to parents at home and to rulers in public.

Loyalty was the first and most important criterion for the Chinese government in recruiting and training Chinese officials. Chinese intellectuals and officials placed great emphasis on self-training in loyalty in order to take public office. They believed that “under the wide heaven all is the king's land; within the sea-boundaries of the land, all are the king's servants” (Mote 1979). The emperor was the sole source of power, final authority, and laws. Only the emperor himself had the power to hand down final decisions. Even powerful ministers did not have the slightest privilege to make decisions for the emperor. Common people were expected to unconditionally obey. Any action that strayed from tradition and custom was regarded as an abandonment of orthodoxy. The emperor tested officials' loyalty using the strategy known as “point to a deer, call it a horse” (in Chinese 指鹿为马). In periods ruled by wise and open-minded emperors, philosophers might rebuke such rulers with impunity, but in the dictatorial empire one might be put to

death. This explains why the minds of the Chinese people were not very creative in premodern China (Greel 1975, 141).

Chinese liberal intellectuals began to attack Confucianism during the Republic era, and Communism's official ideology continued to criticize it under the Mao regime. In traditional China, Chinese people had great passion for education, and teachers had the highest levels of public respect (Coughlan 2013). After the establishment of socialist China in 1949, and especially during the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, teachers experienced turbulence and found themselves with very low social status and income. Education was no longer a good career choice, but rather an entry-level job which would hopefully lead to better things (Guo 2005). In the post-Mao era, however, the Communist Party of China (CPC) has tried to restore the Chinese tradition of respect for education, and has suggested that the Confucian tradition of teaching might open the way to developing an education that "is appropriate for the needs of the twenty-first century" (Li 2014, 22–32). The CPC has encouraged intellectuals to join the education sector by improving teachers' quality and their social and economic status (Sun 2012, 314–329). As such, education has been rapidly expanding and has found its way to a new stage in the post-Mao era.

Despite these recent improvements, however, contemporary Chinese education is under the sole leadership of the CPC. Under the Mao regime, China's education system was the primary instrument to sustain socialism. The aim of education was to "serve proletarian politics and be integrated with productive labor" (Mao 1958, 7). Mao believed that knowledge was less important than productive labor. Thus, political education and productive labor constituted the major features of the curriculum. In the post-Mao era, the CPC has made great efforts to improve education in order to boost the economy and advance science and technology. Chinese intellectuals enjoyed renewed academic freedom and enthusiastically participated in domestic and international activities in the 1980s. After the Tiananmen Square Incident of 1989, however, the CPC has further tightened its ideological control on Chinese education, insisting that China

continue to uphold the great banner of socialism with Chinese characteristics and requiring education to serve that system.<sup>1</sup>

The Chinese educational system is vital but enmeshed within its party system. The highest educational organization in China is the Ministry of Education, which reports directly to the State Council. In turn, the State Council is controlled by the Political Bureau of the CPC. The Ministry of Education is responsible for determining broad policies and selecting textbooks, providing curricula outlines and running higher education through the university entrance-examination system. The branches of the Ministry of Education at provincial, city, and county levels must implement the policies and regulations made by higher-level offices. Although the educational authorities have been decentralized, the Ministry of Education retains key decision-making power. In this sense, the Chinese system is essentially a sub-political education system and remains a weak bureaucratic actor because it mainly serves the highly centralized political system instead of training talented intellectuals.

The CPC is deeply worried about the by-products of “academic freedom.” According to the party, Western culture is eroding the foundation of self-confidence of intellectuals and students and fomenting a color revolution that threatens the Party. Chen Baosheng, Chinese minister of Education, points out that “the first option for Western hostile forces infiltrating us is our education system. To wreck your future, first of all they wreck your schools” (Buckley 2016). According to Chen, the education system is an important foundation and the frontier of the ideological work of the CPC. The education system has two main goals: to produce socialist ideas and to cultivate talented people. These two production processes are intertwined and the combination of them is seen as integral to the future of the party. Clearly, education is an important basis for the ideological work of the CPC.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-term Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020).” [https://internationaleducation.gov.au/News/newsarchive/2010/Documents/China\\_Education\\_Reform\\_pdf.pdf](https://internationaleducation.gov.au/News/newsarchive/2010/Documents/China_Education_Reform_pdf.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> Chen Baosheng 陈宝生. Education system is the first target of the infiltration of hostile forces (敌对势力的渗透首先选定的是教育系统). <http://news.sina.com.cn/c/nd/2016-12-10/doc-ifyypipt0847554.shtml>.

In December 2014, Chinese president Xi Jinping called for greater ideological guidance in China's universities and urged the study of Marxism. Universities should step up the party's leadership and serve to strengthen its ideological and political work in order to cultivate and practice the core values of socialism, he argued.<sup>3</sup> In 2016, Xi Jinping has again reemphasized the importance of politics in the educational sphere. The central task of Chinese schools, he says, is to help students improve "in ideological quality, political awareness, moral characteristics and humanistic quality to enable them to develop both ability and integrity."<sup>4</sup>

Apparently, traditional Chinese education and the current system share something in common: they discourage diverse ideas and academic freedom. The principles of current Chinese education have obvious negative consequences. First, non-experts lead experts at every educational institution from elementary school to university in that Party leadership is valued above that of the educational administration. Heads of educational institutions are appointed by those in the higher levels of the Party organization, and the basic criteria for selecting such leaders are loyalty and connection to the Party, not ability to manage academic institutions. Second, China's educational institutions are not faculty-centered, but administration-centered. Faculty members do play a role in education, but that role is very limited. This system emphasizes administration promotion, but degrades academic achievements. It respects officials more than professional concerns. Third, the socialist Chinese educational system puts political correctness at the top of the work agenda and regards cultivating socialist values as its number one priority. This directive requires teachers and students to support the Party unconditionally; accordingly, Communist philosophy and policy have become central to the curriculum. To enforce their mandate, the CPC encourages Party and Youth League members to secretly report teachers whose speech violates political correctness. Anyone who offends the Party is subject to punishment. This education system conflicts with the spirit of academic freedom, suffocates creative

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<sup>3</sup> "China's Xi calls for tighter ideological control in universities," *Reuters*, December 29, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> "Xi Calls for strengthened ideological work in colleges," *Xinhua*, December 9, 2016.

thinking, and weakens students' social ability. Without a doubt, socialist education is fundamentally opposed to the values of modern education in developed countries in the twenty-first century.

### **How Will China Slow the Brain Drain?**

The basic criterion for assessing what constitutes a world-class education is not the number of educational institutions but the quality of teaching and level of academic excellence achieved. Both of these components are promoted by faculty members and students. It is impossible for China to achieve a world-class educational system if students and other intellectuals keep leaving the country. Theoretically, as China ascends, more resources will be available for use at educational institutions. When enough programs are introduced, this thinking goes, students and teachers will no longer feel the need to go abroad to pursue a professional career. In the past three decades, however, China has been experiencing a serious brain drain. Despite a huge amount of investment in promoting various programs in the global brain race—such as the Thousand Talents Program, Thousand Young Talents Program, and the Thousand Foreign Talents Program—the government has achieved little success in reversing the flow of talented students and professors away from China.

Of the Chinese students who have flooded American and European universities, 83% were graduate students (Huang 2009, 643–653). According to the Chinese Ministry of Education, 523,700 Chinese students went abroad to study in 2015 alone, representing a 13.9% increase over 2014 levels. China has become the world's leading source of international students. The proportion of foreign students in the United States who are from China has increased more than six times in the past 15 years.<sup>5</sup> More than a quarter of a million Chinese students, about 287,260, hold active U.S. student visas, which is more than the number of students from Europe, South America, Africa, Australia, and elsewhere in North America combined.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "China Overseas Study Market Analysis Report," 中国海外留学市场 分析报告. <http://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/EY-china-overseas-study-market-analysis-report-2014-cn/%24FILE/EY-China-Overseas-Study-Market-Analysis-Report-2014-cn.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> "China Overseas Study Market Analysis Report," 中国海外留学市场 分析报告. <https://wenku.baidu.com/view/1b72a2466c175f0e7dd13753.html>.



Almost one-third of all foreign students in the U.S. are from China (Newman 2014). This flight of Chinese students and other intellectual elites for foreign countries has created the world's worst brain drain and has delayed the process of achieving a world-class educational system in China (Banu 2014).

Because of globalization, studying abroad has become one of the most important choices a Chinese student can make, and it is expected that even more students will participate in abroad programs in the future, when tuition of foreign universities becomes affordable with the relaxation of visa restrictions on Chinese students by foreign countries (Clotfelter 2010). However, additional factors explain why, of the large number of Chinese students and intellectuals who study abroad, only a handful return to China after finishing their program. Even of those who do return to China, many go back to foreign countries again after staying in China for a while. China's political education—or political brainwashing—is one of the most important factors as to why students choose to leave China. In the Mao era, the educational model was an anti-expert, revolution-centered model. Mao specifically suggested that “All work in schools is for the purpose of transforming the students ideologically. Political education is a link of the center, and it is undesirable to teach too many subjects” (Mao 1969, 10). Curriculum should be meaningful to the class struggle, this philosophy holds; textbooks should be political. In the post-Mao era, the CPC retains very tight control over education. This control has been tightening even further in recent years, and, accordingly, the emphasis on political education has increased. Three standard political courses remain in the curriculum of higher education: History of the Chinese Communist Party, Marxist Economics, and Marxist Philosophy. Although the titles of these standard political courses change from time to time, the nature of ideological control over students and teachers never does. Students are not qualified to graduate without passing the communist political courses. This political education costs students time, constrains students' initiatives, and results in lower academic competitiveness of Chinese students in global society.

The lack of academic freedom in Chinese education restricts students' growth and development and causes them to lose interest in their studies. There has been much uniformity across the country “in terms of curricula, textbooks, and

examinations" (Cheng 2013, 1–29). Classrooms focus too much on ideology instead of on enlightening young minds. Students are severely restricted in their access to information and ability to express their political viewpoints. David Ho observes that "the classroom is also highly controlled, marked by unidirectional communication from the teacher to students. What teachers and students say in the classroom may be monitored, especially during periods of political sensitivity. The strategy for survival is: 'don't think, just teach' for teachers; and 'don't question, just study' for students" (Ho 2014). Consequently, Chinese teachers usually do not have the motivation to encourage students to participate, and many students, especially those in large classrooms, do not pay any attention to their teachers, instead playing computer games and doing their own work during classtime. This explains in part why many students become outstanding only after they have gone overseas to study.

Even private institutions in China are subject to government oversight. China began to establish private schools in large cities in the mid-1980s. The government did not begin to recognize private universities until the 1990s. By 2001, only eighty-nine private institutions of higher education were accredited by the Ministry of Education to offer degrees and diplomas. China today has about 390 private universities. In fact, they are not completely "private," but are affiliated with the government. In this sense, the Party/government still has absolute power over these private schools and universities. Now, China has implemented new regulations that no longer approve the establishment of any new private schools with foreign influence and bar foreign investment in private schools in order to prevent the West from infringing on China's educational sovereignty (Kan 2016). This means that China's private educational Institutions, including elementary, middle, and high schools and universities, must follow the principles of the CPC and uphold national sovereignty and ideology. In other words, even students in private schools in China cannot avoid being brainwashed by the communist ideology. One of the main reasons for Chinese students to leave China for foreign countries is that they want to receive a quality education instead of a narrow political one.

Another factor that contributes to brain drain in China is related to the high expectations from students' families. Under the One-Child Policy, Chinese parents

put a lot of pressure on their only child to have a successful life. They hold their children responsible for eventual admission into a university because they feel their children's education is the most important thing in their lives. The parents of Chinese students carefully supervise their children doing homework and closely monitor their academic progress. They come to the school three to five times a semester to update their own knowledge of the curriculum in order to help their kids with homework and prepare them for higher education (Huang 2013, 689–710). To be sure, Western education is seen as the best from the perspective of most parents. Many students' parents do not want to see their children live in a polluted environment and a society with great uncertainty about the future. Chinese politics is not transparent. The decision-making process occurs in a dark box. Nobody knows what goes on with government policy processes until they are announced. When a bad policy comes out, the damage is already done. This unpredictability elevates people's anxiety. When investors feel the return of an investment is uncertain, they look for a better place to invest; when students' parents are not sure what will happen in the future, they prefer to send their children to a stable country as early as they can. Both the exodus of financial capital and the brain drain are symptoms of the same social instability. This trend of financial and human capital flight will likely only get worse with the ripple effects of global populism.

Many parents even send their children to developed countries for high school in order to avoid China's competitive educational system and *Gao Kao* (the National Higher Education Entrance Examination). The Chinese system is designed for students to work as hard as they possibly can, and Chinese students spend more time in school than students in Western societies. On average, under the current Chinese educational system, "the length of the secondary school year is 254 days. Chinese students get around four weeks off in winter, and seven weeks in summer, including weekends and all kinds of traditional festivals" (Kan 2014). Chinese students go to school for eight hours a day with a one hour break for lunch. After-school programs play an important role for the development of primary and secondary students. This

system is good for students to lay a foundation of knowledge, but parents, especially liberal parents, simply do not believe this system is good for training talented people. Therefore, they would rather spend more money so that their children can study abroad earlier.

### **Does China's Examination System Help Students' All-Around Development?**

The Chinese educational system is test-oriented. China established the earliest civil service examination system in the world. This system came into existence in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE), was officially implemented in the Sui dynasty, and was perfected in the Tang dynasty. In traditional China, the purpose of education was narrow: to become a member of the bureaucratic class through passing the civil service exam. The examination system has been regarded as a ladder of social ascendancy from ancient times to the present day because a student's career is determined by her test scores. The examination system became a symbol of centralized power in China, directly serving ideological control efforts and the highly centralized political system. China's examination system was halted during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), but restored in 1978.

As a part of the examination system, Chinese students are required to take competitive tests at every stage of their education, from elementary school to university. The only way in which Chinese students in primary school are passed on to middle school is through the Middle School Admission Examination (*xiao kao*); and the only way Chinese students in middle school go on to high school is through the High School Admission Examination (*zhong kao*). The only path for Chinese students to go from high school to university is through the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or *gao kao*, and the only way Chinese students in universities go on to graduate school is through the Graduate School Entrance Examination (*yan jiu sheng ru xue kao shi*). The core of China's examination system is the *gao kao*, which is a prerequisite for entrance into all higher education institutions.

The Chinese examination system places students under tremendous stress through intense competition, which can damage their confidence and lower their

self-esteem.<sup>7</sup> The major responsibility of every school is to get students ready to take the gao kao, students do not have any other choice but to sacrifice activities in order to study for the exam, so that they can have the best opportunity to succeed in post-secondary education. The competitive exam system pushes schools to wage “examination wars” on students (Lin 1995, 149–168). High-stakes tests pit students against one other in a zero-sum game (Gao 2012, 1–5). When students start to approach the gao kao, they usually spend 14–16 hours a day preparing for the exam (LaFraniere 2009). Such intense focus on a single test does more harm than good to children because it ignores each individual's unique interests and passions, and also damages students' health and intellectual development. Some students have committed suicide due to the high pressure of the gao kao. In fact, the exam was the number one cause of death for students in Shanghai in 2009 and 2010 (Grenoble 2013). So many students have killed themselves in response to this test, that in 2013, incoming freshmen at a university in Guangdong province were asked to sign a contract waiving the school of any responsibility in the event any of them commit suicide (Grenoble 2013).

Another problem with the gao kao is that its results limit students' control over their choice of major (Walter 2013, 532–543). Students are admitted to universities and majors only if their scores meet the admission standards for both. In other words, students who have less desirable scores may lose the chance to choose the major they want to study. The gao kao also narrows down the curriculum because it covers only four subjects—literature, mathematics, foreign language, and comprehensive test—rendering untested subjects such as art, music, and sports irrelevant (Li 2014). From elementary to high school, Chinese students have to prepare for the gao kao by focusing only on exam subjects and ignoring others, even those they might be more interested in (Tang 2007, 77–82). In their last year of high school, students often skip classes in untested subjects in order to review

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<sup>7</sup> Liqing Tao, Margaret Berci, and Wayne He, “Education as a Social Ladder to personal and professional success in China?” *New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/ref/college/coll-china-education-004.html>>.

materials on the tested subjects. Under these circumstances, there is no room for Chinese schools to establish a wide variety of electives to support balanced and individualized development (Yu 2005, 17–33).

The test-oriented education system does not encourage creativity, but produces test-taking experts (Ringmar 2013). Chinese teachers rely on lecture as their primary teaching method, largely emphasizing memorization, which is good for students' test-taking ability, but not for their problem-solving skills (Chu 2011). The reason Chinese teachers rely on lecture is that it is the most efficient method to cover all of the material for the *gao kao* within a limited amount of time (Sun 2013). The result of this focus on lecture is that in Chinese classrooms, students do not ask questions—not only do they not want to ask, but they do not know how (Mackenzie 2006, 55–75).

The focus on lecture at the expense of critical thinking is often a problem at universities as well, and even some college students give up asking questions. If a student expresses an opinion that runs contrary to the teacher, the student will be criticized. As a result, students may know ideas or concepts, but do not know how to apply them. Consequently, most students have lost the ability to think independently and have become little more than “test machines” (Su 1989, 614–618). Obviously, the test system demands a rote learning strategy that does not teach critical thinking (Chen 2015). Yong Zhao, a Foundation Distinguished Professor in the School of Education at the University of Kansas, points out that “the test scores are far from meaningful educational outcomes. In fact, excessive focus on test scores hinders a real education” (Zhao 2014). China's educational focus needs to shift from memorization to individuality, self-expression, inquiry, and creative thought. Students should have enough space to learn on their own in order to develop their abilities to innovate and practice.

Finally, a test-oriented education is unable to provide a skilled workforce for the job market. Many Chinese companies complain about a shortage of people who have the skills and capabilities necessary to make good employees. The test-oriented education actually works in opposition to the primary goal of education—that is,

teaching students to think critically and creatively—because instead students are trained to memorize existing facts, fish for existing solutions, and execute orders without question.<sup>8</sup> This negative consequence of the Chinese examination system, however, has created an opportunity for vocational education to develop rapidly. Vocational education trains students to become adept at specific trades and crafts, such as electrical work, plumbing, and mechanics, and it is a major channel to boost economic growth and mitigate structural labor supply and demand issues. Statistics show that employment opportunities for vocational education students are very positive, with an employment rate above 95%, higher than that of college graduates (Biermann 1999, 21–41). In 2011, approximately 22 million students enrolled in vocational schools in China. On the one hand, the fast growth of vocational education partially indicates the failure of the examination system; on the other, it can be seen as a sign of income disparity amongst the Chinese people due to the fact that the majority of students in vocational schools are migrant workers, laid-off workers, students failing the college entrance exam, and unemployed youth.

### **Does Commercialized Education Support Mass Education?**

There is a co-relationship between mass education and modernization. The practice of mass education, or public school for all, appeared in European countries and the United States during their respective periods of modernization. Some might argue that mass higher education began in developed countries after the Second World War. The development models of these countries in the past seventy years have showed that it is impossible to establish a world-class educational system without a solid national mass education. As early as 2,000 years ago, Confucius began to advocate for “education for all” (in Chinese *you jiao wu lei*), which suggested that there should be no class distinction in education and that all people essentially possess four qualities: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, and wisdom (Hawkins 1974, 26–27). According to Confucius, by nature, men are nearly alike; by practice, they become very different (Chen 1990). Confucius tried to teach everyone who came to

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<sup>8</sup> Yangsheng Huang, “The Problem with China’s Education System.” <[http://brianbarrons.typepad.com/my\\_weblog/the-problem-with-chinas-education-system.html](http://brianbarrons.typepad.com/my_weblog/the-problem-with-chinas-education-system.html)>.

him for learning, even those who could not afford to pay for the instruction. Yet, the motto of “education for all” could not become popular practice during that time. In pre-communist China, education was a privilege of wealthy families, and only those who were members of the nobility and destined to become *jun zi* or government officials had the opportunity to receive a formal education.

China still carried out an elite education system in the Mao era, but Deng Xiaoping's administration believed that education is the foundation of modernization, and primary education is the foundation for that foundation. Since the promulgation of the “Compulsory Education Law of the People's Republic of China” in 1986, the Chinese government made nine years of education compulsory for all children at the provincial, municipal, county, district, and township levels; ensured financial sources of funding for education; promoted vocational and technical education; and reformed enrollment planning for higher education and the system of job assignment after graduation (Lewin 1994). About 20 million children registered for kindergartens and 146,269,600 pupils in primary schools in the early 1980s (Hu 1987). The Seventh Five-Year Plan (1986–1990) affirmed that universal elementary education was “a major foundation and a mark of modern civilization.”<sup>9</sup> The Chinese government's efforts increased the educational level of the Chinese people and greatly promoted China's modernization.

The size of higher education was still small between 1978 and 1998, until the Chinese government decided to expand higher education in 1999. Chinese universities accepted 270,000 students in 1978, 1.08 million in 1998, 1.6 million in 1999, and 6.85 million in 2012.<sup>10</sup> About 460,000 students graduated from four-year universities in 1982, 850,000 in 1999, 1.87 million in 2003, and 7 million in 2013.<sup>11</sup> Accordingly, “by 2013 the number of universities had more than doubled from 1998 to over 2,400 institutions, the number of university teachers had

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<sup>9</sup> “Proposal of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party for the Seventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (September 23, 1985),” *Beijing Review* 40 (October 1985), p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> China Handbook Editorial Committee, *Education and Science*.

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb\\_sjzl/s5990/201511/t20151125\\_220958.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/jyb_sjzl/s5990/201511/t20151125_220958.html).



increased by over 3.5 times, to almost 1.5 million" (Soo 2015, 637–661). In addition, almost every higher education institution has, since 1999, developed a variety of programs to make extra profit, such as tutorial, training, and summer programs. The influence of commercialism in higher education has a negative effect on faculty members and students. Overall, this higher education bubble indicates that China's universities have transformed from an elitist model of selecting few to a populous model of educating large numbers of students; higher educational institutions have transformed from free "public goods" to commodities to be purchased in a market-oriented economy. Higher education has become commercialized and deviated from its primary goal (Tan 2013, 107).

Even as it has provided more opportunities for Chinese students, commercialized education has created structural problems. First of all, the purpose of Chinese education is no longer intended to fulfill educational value, but to pursue maximized profit (Chen 2004, 30). Most universities emphasize the single-minded pursuit of increasing size and revenue with little motivation to improve the quality and employability of their students. As a result, corruption and academic misconduct have become serious issues in Chinese higher education. In 2014 alone dozens of university officials and leading scientists were arrested or imprisoned for corruption (Jia 2014). According to the official media outlet *Xinhua*, since 2015 a total of 117 academic papers involving Chinese authors were withdrawn from international publishers, including *Nature*, *Springer*, and *Elsevier*, due to academic dishonesty.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, a large gap has emerged between the knowledge of college graduates and the actual demands of the work force (Zhao 2010). China has the world's largest higher education sector, with 7 million college graduates entering the job market annually, but in recent years more than 30% of college graduates have failed to secure a job upon graduation (Zhao 2010, 10–25). This problem is almost certainly due to the speed with which China's higher education sector expanded; the job market has simply not caught up. The disparity has directly

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<sup>12</sup> "China exposes cases of academic misconduct," State Council of the People's Republic of China. [http://english.gov.cn/state\\_council/ministries/2016/12/13/content\\_281475514810082.htm](http://english.gov.cn/state_council/ministries/2016/12/13/content_281475514810082.htm).

contributed to the aggravation of structural unemployment, and forced many graduates to consider going overseas to avoid competing in an adverse job market (Li 2007, 143–158).

Also due to the expansion of higher education, college campuses have become crowded. Students are anxious in cramped classrooms, libraries, dining rooms, and dormitories. The learning environment is deteriorating and teaching quality is decreasing. The fast speed of the expansion of higher education has brought a great shortage of qualified teachers. Many schools have problems of having too many students versus the number of teachers (Dillon 2010). Over-loaded teachers have less time for their own professional development and for helping students individually. In addition, a high percentage of faculty members take part time jobs outside the campus that conflict with their professional commitments and affect their teaching and mentoring relationships with students.

To deal with these issues, colleges and universities have built more buildings and even entire new campuses, and recruited more faculty and staff. However, central and local governments have not increased their investment for higher education. Thus, some higher educational institutions have fallen into debt problems (Zhao 2009, 86–92). Chinese universities have significantly increased tuitions and other surcharges in response to the financial issues and government budget cuts. Although there are three types of student loan programs available in China—the General-Commercial Student Loans Scheme (GCSL), the Government-Subsidized Student Loans Scheme (GSSL), and the Government-subsidized Student Resident Loan (SRL), it is not easy for students to get loans because financial institutions are reluctant to lend to them. Banks believe that Chinese college and university graduates are not adequately prepared for the job market. Also, students are difficult to track after they leave school due to China's lack of a well-established credit system, including the absence of effective assessment, accreditation, and qualification systems.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> "China: A Brief Description of the Chinese Higher Education System," <[http://gse.buffalo.edu/org/inthigheredfinance/files/Country\\_Profiles/Asia/China.pdf](http://gse.buffalo.edu/org/inthigheredfinance/files/Country_Profiles/Asia/China.pdf)>.

Under these circumstances, parents' financial burden has increased. It is estimated that the share of educational expenditures in the household budget increased from 1% to 8.3% between 1988 and 2003 (Tan 2013, 113). At present, on average, college tuition in China is about \$1,300 a year plus surcharges, living expenses, and the hidden costs of higher education. Often, parents need to pay extra money under the guise of "sponsoring fees" or "voluntary donations" to secure a slot for their child in a reputable school, and pay handsomely for hiring teachers to offer tutoring to their children for even further advantage. Education fees are a heavy burden for families, particularly for the poor (Ngok 2007, 153). China's educational fees are almost unjust in terms of the income of common Chinese citizens. China's GDP per capita was only about \$6,800 in 2013 and about \$8,000 in 2015. The unjustified financial cost of education conflicts with the original purpose of mass education and blocks opportunities for students from poor families to receive higher education. Without a doubt, it contributes to educational inequality between different social groups and regions.

### **Will China Be Able to Effectively Address Inequality in Education?**

It is necessary to gradually eliminate educational inequality in order to successfully transform education from an elite privilege to a mass right. In the post-Mao era, the CPC has tried to reduce the population living in poverty in rural areas through mobilizing community resources and incorporating international aid. The impoverished population of the rural areas was reduced from about 250 million in 1978 to only 8 million in 1995 (Zhang 2006, 261–86). Since 2001, a series of governmental student assistance programs, including "Free Textbooks," "Two Waivers and One Subsidy," and "New Mechanisms," have been in place. In 2006, the government announced that all tuition and fees for compulsory education would be waived for students in rural areas (Guo 2007, 213–30).

Despite these efforts to level the playing field, however, China's economic growth does not necessarily guarantee fair distribution of educational resources. China's success in education—for example, the implementation of compulsory

education and eliminating illiteracy –has been mainly in urban areas. Urban areas have greater economic support to implement reform policies on education. By the same token, education in rural areas is significantly inferior to urban areas mainly because of a shortage of funding and of quality teachers. Educational inequality between urban and rural areas in China remains the highest in the world (Cheng 2009, 101). Many rural schools lack basic accommodations, getting by with outdated technology equipment or no equipment at all. Some rural areas have one computer per village, while many urban areas have computer classrooms in all of their schools (Wang 2011, 36–46). According to a 2011 survey, 58.2% of teachers in the Guizhou, Gansu, and Ningxia provinces indicate that teaching resources are limited, affecting the training of students. Only 7.2% of teachers believe that existing books and materials are sufficient, while 32.6% of teachers feel that they can not meet their teaching needs under current circumstances (Wang 2011, 36–46). A shortage of funding has resulted in insufficient curriculum development and training for teachers in rural areas.

China's education policy is biased in favor of the urban sphere, focusing primarily on developed areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Wuhan, and Guangzhou. Almost every university and most reputable middle and high schools are located in urban areas. China's expenditure on education was about 4.15% of China's total GDP in 2014, making it 104th among 194 countries in terms of spending on education.<sup>14</sup> Although China's total education expenditures are relatively huge, the government spends most of its fund on “key schools,” enabling more urban students to enroll and easily obtain opportunities while underfunding schools in rural areas (Wang 2011, 227). The province with the lowest illiteracy rate was in Beijing at 3.3%, but the provinces of undeveloped regions such as Tibet showed a radically different statistic with a rate of 36.8% of their population illiterate or semi-literate.<sup>15</sup> One researcher showed that an applicant from Beijing is 41 times more

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<sup>14</sup> “List of countries by spending on education (% of GDP).” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_countries\\_by\\_spending\\_on\\_education\\_\(%25\\_of\\_GDP\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_spending_on_education_(%25_of_GDP)).

<sup>15</sup> “List of Chinese administrative divisions by illiteracy rate.” [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_Chinese\\_administrative\\_divisions\\_by\\_illiteracy\\_rate](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_Chinese_administrative_divisions_by_illiteracy_rate).

likely to be admitted to Beijing University than a student from the poor rural areas (Gao 2014). This suggests that China's reform policies have done little to narrow the urban-rural gap.

The *hukou* system has reinforced the implementation of an urban-biased education policy. The *hukou* is a record in the system of household registration required by law in China. The original intention of the *hukou* system was to slow migration to urban areas. Scholars generally agree that there were about 250 to 300 million migrant workers in the last decade, making up about one third of China's labor force. These migrant workers have fueled urban economic growth in the past three decades, but their rural residency permits (*hukou*) prevent them from receiving the same social benefits the government provides to urban residents, including free public education for their children (Li 2013).

Migrants bring with them to the cities about 20 million children, 44% of whom are aged between six and fourteen, and they should attend school (Fang 2014). However, these migrant children have limited options for education in the city. First, there are some special schools for migrant children, but they are usually expensive, profit-driven, and low quality. Second, if they attend public schools, the migrant students are required to pay hefty fees, or bribe their way in. Third, China requires students to take the national college entrance examination in their home provinces. Once children get to the end of middle school, their choices are either to end their education or go back to the rural area where they are registered to take the exam. Most migrants do not have any choice at this point but to send their children back to their hometowns.

Obviously, the *hukou* system has stripped generations of migrant children of equal rights and opportunities for education. Although China has begun to reform the registration system in some provinces, it is a long way from reaching the goal of reform due to political, economic, and cultural imbalances among different regions of the country. In reality, the government has put more restrictions on peasants to prevent them from moving to mega-cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, while making it easier for peasants to receive a *hukou* in small or median-sized cities.

Gender is another area in which Chinese education is not equal. Gender inequality aligns with the inequity between rural and urban education because females in rural settings are particularly disadvantaged in terms of educational access and opportunities (Cheng 2009, 92). Influenced by traditional Chinese culture, most parents prefer to spend their educational investments on their sons. Women are burdened with both productive labor and housework, so some female students are forced to withdraw from school to take care of their families. Statistics show that at all levels of schooling the percentage of female enrollment is smaller than that of males. The higher the education level, the lower the percentage of female students present (Li 2004). In regular higher education institutions not only is women's level of participation low, but there is also a severe gender imbalance in some disciplines, such as physics, mechanics and engineering, and computer science. There are noticeably fewer women than men at the highest levels of higher education in China (Ma 2004). These facts explain why Chinese women still have high rates of illiteracy. China's illiterate population accounts for 11.3% of the world's total, and among these illiterate Chinese, 80% of them reside in rural areas and more than 70% of them are female (Fan 2007).

Educational inequality also exists between the Han and minority people. According to the sixth national census conducted in 2010, the total minority population of mainland China was 113.79 million, accounting for 8.49% of China's total population (Cheng 2013, 1–29). About 72% of minorities resided in the poor western region of China, while 16% lived in the central region, and only 12% resided in the eastern region.<sup>16</sup> This means that the majority of minority people live in national poverty areas. Although the government introduced the Law on Regional Ethnic Autonomy in 1980, China's policy-makers have not effectively applied these policies to different ethnic minorities (Rong 2006, 1–20).

Along with the poor ethnic minorities in China, a truly modern mass education must include disabled people. According to China's official data, there are about 85

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<sup>16</sup> "Geographical patterns of Chinese ethnic minority population composition and ethnic diversity." <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11769-011-0487-8>.

million disabled people in China (Tatlow 2013). It is worth noting that China has an artificially low rate of disability because the government only officially recognizes six types of child disabilities—visual, hearing, intellectual, physical, psychiatric, and multiple impairments. More people with disabilities would probably be identified if national surveys measured disability in terms of the activities of daily living. Since the 1980s, the Chinese government has established various laws related to education for disabled people. The Compulsory Education Law is a landmark law that requires all children who have reached the age of six to be enrolled in school and receive compulsory education for nine years (Lewin 1994). By the law, students with disabilities can attend a general classroom (Kritzer 2012, 52–56). However, teaching disabled students alongside regular students is ineffective; because the test-oriented curriculum is highly competitive, it is difficult for disabled students to learn along with regular students. Classes are large and that also makes it hard for disabled students to learn (Qian 2012, 903–13). Disabled students are not only practically ignored by their teachers, but also discriminated against. Teachers make little effort on behalf of students with disabilities. Many teachers are even afraid to teach students with disabilities because not only is it difficult, but doing so could bring down their evaluation, since teachers are judged based on how well their students do on the tests. Thus, some disabled students prefer to stay at home although they are officially enrolled in school.

## **Conclusion**

China's educational system is among the oldest in the world. Today, China has the largest number of students and teachers, and these individuals will play critical roles in China's modernization. However, Chinese traditional culture and the centralized Chinese political system have had negative impacts on education. If China really wants to become a global superpower, it has to reform its education system and place modern education at the top of the Party's work agenda. First of all, it is necessary for China to re-affirm the goal of Chinese education and make sure that the main purpose of education is to cultivate creative thinking rather than merely training obedient politicians. Second, the government should realize that inequality in education remains severe, and China will not be able to achieve a world-class

educational system if it cannot effectively decrease this inequality. Thus, the central government should invest more in poorer regions, education for ethnic minorities, women's education, and the education of disabled people. Third, it is necessary to re-evaluate the examination system and develop a new admission system to produce more outstanding talents. Considering China's long tradition, large population, methodology of Chinese teachers, and complicated admission system, it is not realistic to abolish the current examination system, but it is time to establish a comprehensive admission system instead of the extremely test-oriented current system. Fourth, the Chinese government must launch a comprehensive project to slow down the trend of 'brain drain' by using both existing domestic and overseas (*hai gui*) educational resources. Fifth, it is necessary to reform the Chinese political system and allow China's students and teachers more academic freedom. Although there are various explanations as to why rapid economic growth in China and the development of Chinese education are unbalanced, one issue is largely ignored—the so-called socialist education system with Chinese characteristics. This fidelity to Party policy explains why China's rapid economic growth does not guarantee an advanced education system. China will not be able to achieve the goal of providing its citizens with a world-class education until it systematically reforms both its educational system and its political system.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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