

CHARLENE TAN AND VICENTE REYES

## 2. NEO-LIBERAL EDUCATION POLICY IN CHINA

### *Issues and Challenges in Curriculum Reform*

#### INTRODUCTION

A quick glance at the historical developments of China since the early 1980s, and particularly focusing on the introduction of market reforms and the Open Door policy (Guan, 2000) reflects the nation's deliberate move away from a centrally-planned regime to one where markets perform a greater role. Such a move is reminiscent of administrative states that previously took primary responsibility for human welfare and economy to one that "gives power to global corporations and installs apparatuses and knowledges" where individual members of the population are "reconfigured as productive economic entrepreneurs" (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 249) and given responsibility to take care of their own lives. This shift is clear evidence of the influence of neo-liberalism in the development trajectory of China.

Educational changes in China take place against a backdrop of global competition and economic globalisation. The shift from a centrally planned economy to one of a market economy has ushered in major curriculum reforms in China for the past few decades. Underpinned by the administrative structure of decentralised centralism, these reforms reflect neo-liberal education policies and practices such as decentralisation, school autonomy, student-centred teaching, critical and innovative thinking and real-life application. This chapter critically discusses the key characteristics and ideological assumptions of neo-liberal education policy, and its impact on curriculum reform in China. To illustrate the adoption and consequences of neo-liberal education policy in China, this chapter focuses on recent educational changes in Shanghai through its 'Second phase curriculum reform'. Before we explore the issues and challenges of curriculum reform in China, it is instructive to understand the concepts of neo-liberalism and neo-liberal education policy.

#### INTRODUCTION TO NEO-LIBERAL EDUCATION POLICY

##### *Neo-Liberal Education Policy*

Neo-liberalism refers to "the policies and processes whereby a relative handful of private interests are permitted to control as much as possible of social life

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in order to maximise their personal profit” (McChesney, 1999, p. 7). Education represented by public service and schools were “early targets” of the spread of neo-liberal ideas. Reforms in the name of neo-liberal education “included increased exposure to competition, increased accountability measures and the implementation of performance goals” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254) as clear examples of the new forms of management technologies that emerged. The retreat of the traditional state and the entry of the markets saw a sharp increase in the funding of educational institutions. The neo-liberal rationale for this was based on the assumption of the immense contribution that wisdom attained through schooling can make to society for purposes of preparing the population for gainful economic participation and in the process, aid in the nation-building effort. What differentiated this neo-liberal agenda from liberalism was the subtle conversion of the value of social good: “Economic productivity is seen to come not from government investment in education, but from transforming education into a product” (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 254). In a neo-liberal context, education is commodified to become an instrument, a technology or even a skill-set that serves as useful currency in a society governed by the rules of demand and supply.

The neo-liberal model effectively reduces the value of education into a production function determined by the rules of economics. A direct implication of neo-liberal education policies is the transformation of government educational institutions traditionally run under the mantle of public administration. With the advent of the neo-liberal movement, educational institutions moved towards novel modes of “new public management,” associated with “flexibility; clearly defined objectives and a results orientation” as its distinctive features (Olssen & Peters, 2005, 324). Schools designed to be places of learning and formation for young people to become part of civilisation have become neo-liberal locations where individuals receive various inputs – under efficient, effective and efficacious conditions – in order to become gainful economic agents in an increasingly market-driven society.

In general, teacher educators possess “only vague ideas (or no idea) of what neo-liberalism is” (Sleeter, 2008, p. 1955) blissfully unaware of the implications that it has on their profession and on their practice. Notwithstanding, there are others – teachers, academics, policy-makers and even students – who have recognised that within a context of neo-liberalism, education becomes a “site of struggle and compromise” (Apple, 2000, p. 58) where contradictory forces of the ubiquitous market and the individual school actors collide. These collisions are manifested in the constant tension that school stakeholders experience as they attempt to make sense of the traditional tasks of education typified by pastoral care and the learning of basic aptitudes with the incessant reforms driven by market forces clamouring for innovations and a seemingly continuous flow of new economy competencies.

*Key Characteristics of Neo-Liberal Education Policy*

Within the neo-liberal era of deregulation and the triumph of the market, many students and their families no longer believe that higher education is about higher learning, but about gaining a better foothold in the job market. (Giroux, 2002, p. 435)

The phrase “new economy competencies” has become the quintessential catchphrase that represents the greatest impact of neo-liberalism to education. This is consistent with the notion that knowledge is the new capital in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Olssen & Peters, 2005). New economy competencies can be described as the end product of what Giroux refers to as the triumph of the market. Industry players have continually lobbied for education systems to reform the way schools are run and to cater more towards what these lobby groups describe as what the market actually needs. As a consequence, most of the schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> century have fully embraced the emerging neo-liberal identity.

With the pre-eminence of the role of the market and the reconfigured state that complements it, efficiency has emerged as a dictum illustrative of neo-liberal education. Consequently, decentralisation and school autonomy have emerged as two of the overriding characteristics of 21<sup>st</sup> century education. The neo-liberal education mode has been predominated by notions of dispersed “hierarchical models dictated by management concerns” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 325) which have engendered a pronounced shift towards greater decentralisation. Deliberate attempts at decentralisation motivated by the need to restructure organisations of education to “respond to market and state demands” has in most instances resulted to “increasing *specifications* by management over workloads and course content” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 325, emphasis on the original) allowing the advent of new forms of market-driven autonomy. Consistent with the need to be competitive in a market-driven 21<sup>st</sup> century, neo-liberal discourse has also placed great premium on the notion of “survival being an individual responsibility” (Davies, 2005, p. 9) giving rise to an education agenda that prioritises student-centricity, innovation and real-life applications. The traditional notion of education as “learning for its own sake” has been displaced by a mind-set that prepares the 21<sup>st</sup> century learner to have an increased sense of agency, a willingness to try new things and an aptitude to ground education to pragmatic applications. This type of neo-liberal learner becomes better suited to gain what Giroux argued as a better foothold in the job market. In this market dominated context, the identities of learners of the 21<sup>st</sup> century have shifted from one that viewed education as a meaning-making and humanistic experience borne out of rich social relationships towards one that emphasises one’s individual utility.

The neo-liberal self is largely defined in terms of income and the capacity to purchase goods. The desire for goods can be satisfied to the extent that the worker produces whatever the economy demands. This emphasis on consumerism makes the worker compliant to whatever must be done to earn money, since to lose one’s job, to be without income, is to lose one’s identity. (Davies, 2005, p. 9)

Scholars and practitioners have cautioned about the need to balance the overpowering drive of the market and state to push the neoliberal agenda and transform learners into *homo economicus* or the economic being moulded into one exclusively motivated by self-interest against the countervailing push to ensure that learners do not abandon *homo reciprocans* or the person driven to cooperate with mankind recognising that one's own self-interest may not always be the best for the greater good. One of the strongest criticisms against neo-liberalism in education is the perceived de-professionalisation of school personnel manifested in two ways: (1) De-professionalisation that occurs within novel decentralised hierarchies dictated by the market effectively removing "collegial and democratic governance" and (2) Within new versions of autonomy circumscribed by the needs of the market replacing "traditional conceptions of *professional* autonomy" (Olsen & Peters, 2005, p. 325) that have been traditionally shaped by professional communities of educators. The de-professionalisation brought about by neo-liberalism does not only impinge on teachers and educators; students also find that what constitutes progress has been appropriated by the neo-liberal state:

Neo-liberalism strongly reinforced the undermining of the teachers' authority that had been established with progressivism, shifting authority away from both students and teachers to state curriculum and surveillance authorities. In establishing the conditions in which neo-liberal subjects might develop, it added competitiveness and individual responsabilisation to student 'freedom', thus both appropriating and undermining the progressive movement. (Davies & Bansel, 2007, p. 256)

#### *Ideological Assumptions of Neo-Liberal Education*

A fundamental assumption of neo-liberalism is the inherent weakness of what is known as "public," and its converse: the superiority of what is known as private. This ideological conjecture from neo-liberals has a profound impact on education: a move away from the general acceptance of a set of values embraced by a wider community towards a more restricted set of interests:

Neo-liberals are the most powerful element within the conservative restoration. They are guided by a vision of the weak state. Thus, what is private is necessarily good and what is public is necessarily bad. Public institutions such as schools are 'black holes' into which money is poured – and then seemingly disappears – but which do not provide anywhere near adequate results. (Apple, 2000, p. 59)

From the central premise of the weak public emerges the neo-liberal ethos as translated into education: the celebration of the virtues of the private and market-driven schools. In such a scenario, two very specific traits of the neo-liberal type of education are championed: a heightened state of individualism and market-driven values based on hyper-asocial behaviour.

Neo-liberalism as it has evolved and as practised in education has crystallised to represent “a move from social conscience and responsibility towards an individualism in which the individual is cut loose from the social” (Davies, 2005, p. 12) engendering an emerging set of values that rewards accomplishments that are centred on the self over and above others. The unmistakeable trait of maximising gains and profit, a hallmark of neo-liberalism, becomes the goal of the individual in today’s context. This emphasis on the self also becomes fertile ground in establishing another key ideological assumption of neo-liberal education where “surveillance becomes a key element” devaluing social good and where “trust is no longer realistic or relevant” resulting to a context where “each becomes one of the multiple eyes spying on each other” (Davies, 2005, p. 10). The predominance of a heightened state of individualism complemented by the dominance of a culture of surveillance and buttressed by the diminishing value of trust in others creates hyper-asocial behaviour.

The uniquely Chinese form of neo-liberal education policy is accompanied by some key issues and challenges in China. The subsequent sections of this chapter provide a critical discussion of curriculum reform in China, with a focus on Shanghai.

#### CURRICULUM REFORM IN SHANGHAI

##### *Curriculum Reform in China*

The educational vision for recent curriculum reform is expressed by the slogan of ‘quality-oriented education’ (*suzhi jiaoyu*). Often contrasted with ‘exam-oriented education’ (*yingshi jiaoyu*), quality-oriented education signals China’s focus on reforming its educational system against the backdrop of economic globalisation. The concept of ‘quality-oriented education’ was formally mentioned in a government document in 1994 (Tan, 2013). This document, titled ‘Several opinions of the CPC Central Committee on further strengthening and improving moral education in schools’, states:

There is an urgent need for quality-oriented education to increase the adaptation to current development, social progress, and establish the socialist market economic system. There is a need to nurture the students’ spirit in forging ahead, self-reliance and pioneering ... strive to improve the students’ artistic accomplishment and appreciation; for them to be active in adolescent health education, ... to help students improve the psychological quality of a healthy personality, enhance their ability to withstand setbacks and adapt to the environment. (*Zhonggong zhongyang guanyu jinyibu jiaqiang he gaijin xuexiao deyu gongzuo de ruogan yijian*, 1994, italics added)

The imperative to promote a quality-oriented education is due to both internal and external factors. Internally, the Chinese authorities are aware of the social problems engendered by an exam-oriented education. The nature of high-stakes exams has led to negative effects in China. By 1980s, there were public calls for educational

reform to change an exam-oriented education to one that focuses on the students' comprehensive development. Externally, the Chinese authorities are aware of the need to adopt global and 'modern' education policies and practices that prepares their graduates for the challenges of a knowledge-based economy.

The current curriculum reform is the eighth of its kind in China since 1949. Briefly, the first decade after the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 witnessed the introduction of locally-produced teaching materials based on the Soviet model. As a result, education in China has been characterised by knowledge reproduction and transmission, standardisation in teaching, learning and assessment, and didacticism. The impact of cultural factors on the educational policies and practices borrowed from the previous USSR on China is the ideologies of upholding socialism, social and political stability, and centralised state control. In 1958, the government launched an "education revolution" to signal its determination to promote socialist and agrarian education. That lasted until the Cultural Revolution, which occurred from 1966 to 1976 and where all universities were closed and most intellectuals were imprisoned or sent to farming camps. The educational system was rebuilt after 1976 and a national high school exam was introduced in 1977. Modern education reforms began in 1985 when then Chinese leader Deng Xiao Ping stressed the need to develop human talent through education reforms. To achieve the vision of 'quality-oriented education', the Chinese government has introduced drastic changes to the curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in China with variations across provinces and municipalities.

### *Curriculum Reform in Shanghai*

On the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August 2013, the last structural beam of China's tallest skyscraper – Shanghai Tower – was installed. Upon full completion in a few months, Shanghai Tower – all 632 meters of it – would become the tallest building in Asia and the second tallest building in the world (O'Ceallaigh, 2013). This remarkable architectural achievement follows closely the unprecedented hosting of the World Expo 2010, earning for Shanghai the distinction of being the "very first city from the modern developing world" (Chen, 2009, p. 29) to host this mega event. There seems to be no doubt that Shanghai has "become arguably the most vibrant and cosmopolitan place in China during the country's modernisation phase" (BOP Consulting, 2012, p. 84) earning for itself accolades of being a modern global city. This lofty ambition that fuels Shanghai's upward march to progress is driven by the powerful tenets of *neo-liberalism* – a phenomenon that is evident in its recent curriculum reform.

Shanghai is one of the largest cities in China with a population of over 20 million. Arguably the city with the most developed basic education system in China, Shanghai was the first city to implement the nine-year compulsory education. Since 1978, China has implemented compulsory schooling where all children are required to complete at least nine years of schooling. This means completing five years of primary education and four years of junior secondary education. Almost all students

proceed to the senior secondary (high school) level for another three years of study where they will sit for the national college entrance examination to qualify them for tertiary education. Shanghai enjoys high enrolment rate across the levels: 98% of the age cohort attended preschool programmes, 98% of the age cohort attended primary school, 97% of the age cohort attended senior secondary school (general and vocational), and over 80% of the city's higher education age cohort are admitted into higher education (Shanghai Municipal Government, 2010a).

In Shanghai, the current reform is known as the 'Second Phase Curriculum Reform' [*erji kegai*]. The "First Curriculum Reform" (1988-1997) marked a series of major educational reforms aimed at helping schools to meet the needs of rapid economic developments in China. A vice-principal explained that the first curriculum reform aimed for students to have good qualities in thought and conduct, culture and science, body and emotions, labour and skills, and a healthy development of character. A major change was the introduction of three types of subjects: compulsory subjects, electives, and activity-based subjects. The curriculum also underscored the development of students' basic attitudes, knowledge, and ability. The reforms were piloted in 1991, and incrementally rolled out for different levels.

The "Second Curriculum Reform" (1998-present) started in 1998 with the publication of a number of policy papers to inform educators of the reforms. The focus was on how to further implement quality education to meet the requirements of modern times. A vice-principal pointed out that the current emphasis is not just on enhancing scientific knowledge but developing a scientific spirit, attitude and method, as well as shaping one's worldview, value system and whole-brain ability. This reform aims for three 'breakthroughs': reduce excessive schoolwork and increase education quality, strengthen the basics and nurture ability, and raise quality and develop character.

It is evident from official documents that Shanghai keeps an eye on international developments in education (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, n.d.). The task to nurture human talent is particularly essential for Shanghai as it aims to be a modern international economic, financial, trade and shipping centre, and lead China to change from an 'exam-oriented education' to quality education'. Under the current education reform, the new curriculum covers eight domains of learning: language and literature, mathematics, natural sciences, social sciences, arts, skills (including ICT), sports and fitness, and integrated practical learning. The last domain comprises community service and other activities that allow the students to engage with the community. The curriculum is divided into three broad course categories: Foundational Course, Expanded Course, and Inquiry/Research Course (see [Table 1](#)).

Foundational Courses are standardised subjects and compulsory for all students. They represent the basic requirements from the Shanghai municipal government to nurture "quality citizens" for the country. The Expanded Courses, on the other hand, are intended to cater to the students' different interests and learning abilities as well as society's needs. There are two types of Expanded Courses: Compulsory

Table 1. The curriculum for Shanghai schools

<i>Domain of learning</i>	<i>Course category</i>		
Language and Literature			
• includes Chinese and foreign language (English)			
Mathematics			
Natural Sciences			
• includes primary-level Nature, secondary-level science, physics, chemistry, life sciences.			
Social Sciences			
• includes primary-level Conduct and Society, geography, history, political thought, secondary-level Society etc.	Foundational Course	Expanded Course: Compulsory and Elective	Inquiry/ Research Course: Type I and Type II
Arts			
• includes music (song and dance), art			
Technology			
• includes Information Technology and Labour and Technical Skills			
Sports and Fitness			
Integrated Practice			
• includes social practice, community service			

Source: Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (n.d.)

Expanded Courses focus on real-life application in society, while Elective Expanded Courses centre on the various domains of learning such as language, sports and fitness, and arts.

Inquiry/Research Courses serve to help students learn how to acquire knowledge, inspire them to learn and conduct research independently, and apply what they have learnt in real life. It is known as the Inquiry Course to students in the primary to lower secondary levels, and Research Subject at the senior secondary level. Inquiry/Research Courses comprise two types: Type I research focuses on a specific topic or question based on the student's interest and is carried out by the student independently under the guidance of the teacher. Unlike Type I research where the focus tends to be multi-disciplinary, Type II research is more directly linked to the foundational subjects where the student conducts research on specific disciplinary knowledge. By providing three categories of courses, it is hoped that students from the primary to senior secondary levels will have more course options to choose from, depending

on their interests and aptitude, while remaining grounded in a firm foundation of content knowledge. Inquiry/Research Courses aim to help students exercise their cognitive and affective faculties, construct knowledge, and solve problems.

Accompanying the curriculum reform is the introduction of new pedagogy. The authority states that there is a need to review the traditional didactic form of teaching where students are largely passive recipients of learning. Such a mode neglects the students' subjectivity, initiative and cooperation, and therefore should be replaced by a new form of learning that 'advocates active receiving, initiating experience, exploration and discovery of interconnected learning so that realistic, interesting and exploratory learning activities will result in independent autonomy and cooperative exchange' (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission n.d.). Changes are also introduced for the assessment modes. Rather than just assessing students' end results through summative assessment, teachers should track their students' learning process and developmental progress through alternative assessment tools such as the 'Growth Record Booklet' for each student. In line with the desired outcome to nurture students holistically, schools are also encouraged to identify and develop their niches in various areas such as ICT, English, arts and sports. Consequently, there are now schools that specialise in performing arts, chess, technology and citizenship education.

It is noteworthy that the curriculum reform in Shanghai promotes the practices of decentralisation and school autonomy – key characteristics of neo-liberal education policy. By moving away from centralisation, it is hoped that more room will be given to the schools to adapt the curriculum to suit local contexts and meet local needs. School leaders are free to design about one-third of their curricula for the implementation of Expanded Subjects and Inquiry/Research Courses. This means students are free to choose what they wish to study, for about 35% of their curriculum time.

#### KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

##### *A Shift from a "One-size-fits-all" Educational Model to One That Focuses on Individual Interests and Needs*

As noted earlier, education is commodified in a neo-liberal context to become an instrument, a technology or even a skill-set that serves as useful currency in a society governed by the rules of demand and supply. We see this phenomenon of the commodification of education clearly in the case of China in general and Shanghai in particular. As discussed, the municipal government in Shanghai has rolled out education reforms aimed at preparing its students for a knowledge economy so that the city can stay competitive internationally. It is instructive that the official document on the curriculum reform in Shanghai makes reference to worldwide trends in education, in countries such as Japan, Singapore and the United States, which strive for equal opportunity in the classroom, lifelong education, emphasise

application, integration, flexibility, and students' character development (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2010b). In light of these developments, the document added that Shanghai should therefore strive to "achieve modern education, establish a learning society, to inspire everyone to develop his potential, be world-class in educational development and human capital utilisation" by the year 2020. These neo-liberal policies and practices originate from and are more prevalent in Anglophone societies such as the United States and European countries.

The curriculum reforms in Shanghai – more choices to students, greater school autonomy, moving away from exam-oriented, rote-learning, memorisation and passive learning towards learning-oriented, higher-order thinking and active learning – manifest the cardinal characteristics and assumptions of neo-liberalism. In its attempt to meet the demands of the market, the Shanghai municipal government has assembled a machinery of ideas, tactics and practices to further its enduring logic of survival and pragmatism. A high student performance in international assessments such as Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), coupled with the adoption of curriculum reforms common in developed and usually Western countries, is regarded by the authorities as evidence of Shanghai's modernisation and success in a global world.

Underpinning these changes is a shift from a "one-size-fits-all" educational model to one that focuses on individual interests and needs. In other words, the reforms in Shanghai reflect the neo-liberal move from social conscience and responsibility towards individualism (Davies, 2005). It is evident that neo-liberal reforms have been widely implemented in the Shanghai schools. The ideology for quality-oriented education has been crystallised in various slogans that point to a student-centred approach. The document entitled the 'Synopsis of Shanghai's middle and long term education reform and development plan (2010-2020)' states that the aim of such reform is 'for the sake of every child's lifelong learning' (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2010). It is increasingly common for schools to offer a variety of Expanded Subjects such as archery and robotics, and Inquiry/Research Subjects through partnership with universities such as Fudan University. Some schools also run pilot projects that aim to promote innovation, reduce the number of exam preparation classes, and give students more flexible study time. More teachers are adopting alternative pedagogies to complement their usual didactic teaching style. For example, some schools in Shanghai asked students to carry out personal observations at home in order to appreciate a comprehension passage. Asking questions, engaging in dialogues and debates, and participating in group projects and presentations are also increasingly common (Tan, 2013).

#### *Challenges due to the Implementation of Neo-Liberal Policy in China*

However, the neo-liberal education policy in China faces two main challenges. First, although the educational changes attempt to promote more student-centred curriculum, pedagogy and assessment, key educational stakeholders in China still

value traditional forms of teaching and learning that lead to academic success in high-stakes examinations (Tan, 2011, 2012). Despite giving students an array of subjects to choose from (Foundational Subjects, Expanded Subjects and Inquiry/Research Subjects), the authority and universities primarily consider the students' exam results for core Foundational Subjects in the national college entrance exam, such as Chinese, Mathematics and English. The expected consequence is that many students and parents view these core Foundational Subjects as more important than the Expanded and Inquiry/Research Subjects since the former determine their chance of being admitted into a university of their choice. Correspondingly, many schools devote more time and energy to the teaching of Foundational Subjects so that their students can ace the exams while marginalising the Expanded and Inquiry/Research Subjects especially for the graduating cohort. It is not uncommon for teachers to give extra classes to their students after school hours and even on Sundays during the exam period. On top of that, many parents also sign their children up for weekend tuition that focusses on the Foundational Subjects. Unsurprisingly, many students, with the support of their principals, teachers and parents, stop taking the Expanded and Inquiry/Research Subjects in their final year of high school in order to concentrate on their high school exam.

Another implication of the cultural value of academic success is the preference among many students and teachers for exam-oriented strategies, especially textual transmission approach, didactic teaching and repeated practice. These approaches are perceived to be the tried-and-tested ways for them to perform well in high stakes exams. Xu (2007) notes that Chinese students tend to accept what is taught totally and take pride in possessing a high volume of knowledge without articulating their views in class. Correspondingly, most teachers tend to rely on a didactic approach to transmit the "correct" answers to students who are content with being reticent in class. These approaches, which are meant for summative and written assessment in the high-stakes exams, are contrasted with the formative and alternative assessment modes and approaches advocated in the curriculum reform (Shen, 2006; Tan, 2012). That an exam-centric worldview dominates the teaching and learning environment in China has been noted by the Chinese government. A report by the Ministry of Education in 2006, while noting that some teachers have changed their teaching practices to be more student-centred, acknowledges that "quality education is loudly spoken but test-oriented education gets the real attention" (as cited in Zhao, 2007, p. 73).

The second challenge is the de-professionalisation of school personnel where centralised control by the state through the school appraisal system and standardised exams threatens to undermine the professionalism and autonomy of the educators (Tan, 2013). By shifting authority away from both students and teachers to state curriculum and surveillance authorities, neo-liberalism may result in de-professionalisation that undermines the educators' authority (Davies & Bansel, 2007). The acceptance of neo-liberal education policy such as decentralisation, diversification of courses and student-centred learning does not imply the Shanghai government's embracement of neo-liberal values and logics. Likewise, the focus

on the individual does not imply that “the individual is cut loose from the social” (Davies, 2005, p. 12) or that China is embracing an emerging set of values that rewards accomplishments that are centred on the self over and above others. On the contrary, a highly centralised model is maintained by the Chinese government so that the curriculum reforms are “opportunistically combined with the socialist state’s aspirations” so as to produce “self-reliant but state-dominated professionals” (Ong, 2007, p. 6). An indication of the re-centralisation that ensures central control for the municipal government in Shanghai is through the ‘School developmental and supervisory appraisal’ [*Xuexiao fazhanxing dudao pingjia*] (Tan, 2013). First launched in 1999 in some pilot schools, it was implemented to promote quality-oriented education. Under the appraisal system, every school is required to formulate its three-year development plan that comes with a yearly implementation plan. Each school needs to rally the whole school staff to draft the plan based on the demands of the current curriculum reforms that focus on quality education. The school needs to analyse the school’s situation, describe developmental vision, targets, strategies and measures. The Shanghai Municipal People’s Government Educational Supervisory Office will conduct on-site inspection, and the supervisory experts will cast votes on whether the plan passes inspection. Any school plan that does not pass inspection will need to be modified. After the inspection, the school will carry out the plan based on the plan, and regularly carries out self-appraisal work.

We can see from the appraisal system that it is used as a tool to ensure quality assurance and policy alignment. In line with the goal of quality education, the criterion of ‘curriculum content’ looks at whether the school’s curriculum content nurture the students’ innovative spirit, practical ability, and character development. ‘Curriculum management’ looks at whether the school “contains teaching management system and student learning guiding system that are aligned with second phase curriculum reform requirements” (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2005, p. 6). Further references to the curriculum reform goal of quality education are mentioned for the criteria for teaching. Teachers are expected to form a democratic, equal and harmonious, interactive teacher-student relationship and teaching environment, and guide students to explore autonomously, think independently, collaborate, engage in practical activities and utilise modern technology. What it means is that the school appraisal system has made it more demanding now for educators: they have to continue to ensure good academic results while working hard to meet *additional* criteria stated in the school appraisal standard. This means that compared to the past, there appears to be greater, not less, accountability and centralised control for the Shanghai schools.

Another tool for centralised control is the exam system. The decentralisation of tasks and administrative responsibility to the local level is accompanied by the introduction of national standards and to develop national assessments. In other words, there is evidence of the simultaneous practice of decentralisation being countered by a good deal of regulatory re-centralisation. The re-centralisation of national standards is seen in the introduction of standardised terminal exams and

other forms of tests for various grades. These tests and exams are assessments that are standardised at the district or municipal levels. Not only do the students and schools feel the pressure to perform well in exams. The districts are also under pressure as the municipal authority compares the exam scores across districts, thereby creating a competitive atmosphere. All the above function as quality assurance measures as well as means of centralised control even as the schools are given the autonomy in school management and school-based curriculum. All these may contribute towards a de-professionalisation that threatens to remove collegial governance and replace traditional conceptions of professional autonomy (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 325).

### CONCLUSION

This chapter has discussed the key characteristics and ideological assumptions of neo-liberal education policy, and its impact on curriculum reform in China. Focusing on recent educational changes in Shanghai, this chapter has highlighted the key issues and challenges facing China. The shift in China from a centrally-planned regime to one where markets perform a greater role reflects the phenomenon of neo-liberalism as a “technology of governing for optimal outcome at the level of individuals and populations” (Ong, 2008, p. 121) rather than as an example of a modernist doctrine. To put it simply, neo-liberalism can be argued as the retreat of the traditional state and the turning over of the reins of governing to the market. However, it must be pointed out that Chinese neo-liberalism manifests unique, even contradictory features: “China has promoted radical marketisation” (Wang & Karl, 2004, p. 7) alongside explicit central government policy control. This hybrid of neo-liberalism and state control in the Chinese context is the nation’s attempt to combine the notoriously unpredictable forces of the market with the need to preserve social stability achievable through the continued existence of a powerful and centralised state machinery. This contradictory form of Chinese neo-liberalism, where central government dominance exists alongside increased market presence, is seen quite evidently in the domain of education policy and practice.

In view of the educational challenges confronting China, there is a need for policymakers and educators in China to cast a critical eye on the desirability of neo-liberal policies and practices. For example, some writers have also rightly questioned the key presuppositions of neo-liberal policies such as decentralisation: that more autonomy will spontaneously produce improvement, make educational service delivery more innovative and efficient, and make education more accountable to parents (e.g., see Bjork, 2006; Carnoy, 1999; Hannaway & Carnoy, 1993). In addition, there is a need for policymakers and educators to consult indigenous knowledge that include not just traditional knowledge but ways in which non-indigenous knowledge has been adapted and domesticated to serve national purposes (Gopinathan, 2006). Specifically, Chinese educators could explore Asian traditions and philosophies that provide fresh perspectives and recommendations for modern education. For example, Tan (2013) has revisited Confucius’ teachings and argued for the application of a

Confucian framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century education. Rather than merely focusing on 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and competencies at the expense of the moral values and emotional well-being of students and teachers, she advocates holistic development based on Confucius' ideal of spiritual-ethical-aesthetic harmony. Combining indigenous and foreign knowledge has the potential to help policymakers and educators in China adopt neo-liberal educational policy judiciously without the accompanying effects of exam-centric bias and the de-professionalisation of teachers.

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*Charlene Tan*  
*National Institute of Education*  
*Nanyang Technological University*

*Vicente Chua Reyes, Jr.*  
*School of Education*  
*University of New England, Australia*