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## POSTSCRIPT

### *Policy, Markets and the Local*

*Spotlight on China: Changes in Education under China's Market Economy* is a rich overview of Chinese education in an important and difficult period of historical transition and major reform. Shibao Guo and Yan Guo have brought together insightful chapters on the broad array of issues ranging from the ongoing challenges of school and curriculum reform; population growth and mobility; teacher education and work; an emergent private education sector; and, a burgeoning higher education sector. Against a backdrop of emergent policy and official ideological shifts, at the heart of this volume are the host of intended and unintended, collateral and unplanned effects of educational reform for students, teachers, educational administrators, families and communities.

These range from a robust informal “shadow” economy of tutoring (Zhang & Bray, Chapter 6), to high levels of teacher stress and burnout (Beckett & Zhao, Chapter 9), from local schools with limited resources struggling to implement mandates from afar to the emergence of private boarding and tutoring schools (Wang & Chan, Chapter 10), from persistent and emergent patterns of educational inequality in rural and remote settings (Parkhouse & Rong, Chapter 18; Wang, Chapter 19), particularly among cultural and linguistic minorities, to the emergent educational problems and needs of Chinese workers, educators and families on the move in the new economy (S. Guo, Chapter 7; Goodburn, Chapter 21). At the same time, these chapters model the diverse approaches to educational research currently underway in Chinese education: from foundational theoretical work and critical policy analysis, to rigorous empirical analysis and rich interpretive case study.

These brief comments make the case that there are two challenges facing educational research on China: (1) the larger issues of policy and spatial/geographic ‘scale’ in national and regional educational reform; and, relatedly, on how these issues repeatedly return us to (2) the significance of studies of the variable, often idiosyncratic local uptake of policy. Both are directly linked to the cultural, spatial/geographic, demographic and socioeconomic diversity and heterogeneity of the ‘new’ China and, hence, of Chinese education. And both are keys to unpacking the persistent theme that runs across this volume: residual and emergent patterns of educational inequality in access and participation, achievement and outcomes, knowledge and capacity. In so doing, I want to argue that this is less a case of

paradigmatic ‘market-driven’ reform that follows Neoliberal principles, and more an instance of persistent unresolved tension between centrally-generated policy and local uptake, between official ideology and local discourse practice, and ultimately, between grand policy narrative and local educational stories, struggles and everyday practices.

I read this volume as a cultural, linguistic and disciplinary ‘outsider’ to Chinese education. While my general expertise includes educational policy and sociology, curriculum and school reform in Australian, Canadian and Singaporean contexts, I have worked in and around Chinese education for several decades now, occasionally teaching and lecturing at Beijing Normal University. Writing as an overseas Chinese academic, my optics for this piece are, of course, tempered by standpoint and biography – as are the contributions of this remarkable collection of scholars and social scientists based in China, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This said – to the task at hand.

Educational policies are, by definition, official bids to shape the flows and movements of human subjects (e.g., teachers, principals, bureaucrats, lecturers, students and, indeed, families), economic and material resources (e.g., salaries, tuition fees, scholarships, buildings, textbooks), and texts and discourses (i.e., policies, curricula, classroom talk, test and exams) across educational systems (Luke & Hogan, 2011). This shaping sets out to achieve deliberate *normative* ends – including the intergenerational production and transmission of specific ideology and belief, selected cultural practices and specialized knowledges in the interests of individuals, communities, institutions and, indeed, the state and capital. As the authors here point out. There is a clear consensus across this volume that the normative means and ends of Chinese education are in a significant period of transition, with the reform of official curriculum and educational governance, teaching and school leadership focusing on the production of new human capital for domestic and globalized development and growth. This is occurring under the broad auspices of market-based reform of the Chinese economy and key state institutions. It is set against the backdrop of issues of political continuity and social cohesion, with official concern about increasing economic inequality between Eastern and Central China and its Western provinces, between urban and rural populations (e.g., Goodburn, Chapter 21), between Han Chinese and cultural and linguistic minorities, and between children of the emergent middle class and those of low socioeconomic backgrounds (see Yang, Cheng & Bian, Chapter 15).

As elsewhere in East Asia (e.g., Singapore, Korea), the official discourses of curriculum have shifted to focus on those forms of creativity and student-centered learning putatively linked to technological expansion, economic innovation, initiative and entrepreneurship. There is strong focus on what are now the key languages of economic globalization (in this case, Chinese *and* English as new economic commodities; see Y. Guo, Chapter 8; Zeegers & Zhang, Chapter 4), and the newly unified school/university field of STEM (sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics) indexed against the demand for specialized communications and

technological expertise in expanding industrial and digital, financial and service sectors. These are the hallmarks of the new transnational curriculum settlement: a renovation and extension of the postwar human capital model (Luke, 2005). That model was premised on the idea that expanded provision in compulsory schooling and higher education could set the conditions for economic growth with improved social and economic equality.

In this regard, Chinese policy approaches have an apparent kinship with the broader transnational policy settlement which Tan and Reyes (Chapter 2) refer to as ‘Neoliberalism’. As always, the translation of economic and cultural, material and ideological practice from Anglo/American/European educational reform (most recently, through organizations like the OECD) to the Chinese historical and cultural context requires analytic delicacy and empirical caution. I recall a very awkward lecture at Beijing Normal a decade ago, where I attempted to explain the historic roots of the ‘privatization’ and ‘marketization’ of American, British and Australian state education by reference to Chicago School free market economic models and Thatcher-era attacks on the trade-union movement and welfare state. To say the least, the seminar audience and I struggled to map clear historical and material parallels in Chinese economic and social history. So I begin from a cautionary stance about whether and how educational, social and economic ideologies and their affiliated state policies travel across geographic, national and cultural borders, with what historic baggage and cultural meanings, and with which substantive material effects (Luke, 2011).

The North American and European critical take on Neoliberalism focuses on the production of a possessive individualism well-suited for the class-stratified generation of capacities for transnational corporate capitalism. The situation in China, of course, reflects radically different political economic and cultural histories. As Law’s (Chapter 3) discussion of new models of citizenship points out the reforms on the table – while ostensibly driven by a reorientation towards the ‘market’ – underline many key dialectical tensions at work in Chinese education. These include the ideological and practical tensions between reconstructed versions of traditional Chinese culture, state capitalism and socialism, between the “rule of law” and “party rule”, between individual rights and collective state interests. Across this volume we see evidence that curriculum is one key site for the working through of these issues – particularly in attempts to ideologically reconstruct Confucianism, Deweyianism and other intellectual and cultural resources.

In the case of post-1949 expansion of higher education, Zhang, Dai and Yu (Chapter 11) argue that the current university system was born “in denial of, and opposition to” 2000 years of higher education traditions. These have now been supplanted by a Western-derived “hybrid system” that faces major unresolved issues in governance, academic culture and core educational values. The result, they argue, is a higher education system emerging from successive major expansions of scale and infrastructure whose central challenges and future development turn on larger issues of political and economic stability. These emergent and contingent directions

for Chinese universities have potentially ambivalent effects in terms of the system's mixed goals of equity of access, inclusive expansion, and the generation of new knowledge and innovation – particularly in light of the well-documented mixed and highly contentious effects of the corporatization and marketization of higher education in the West (cf. Marginson, 2011).

On the surface at least, we see trace elements of Neoliberal reform at work in both the school and higher education sectors. There is an official discourse on 'quality', on the shifting of fiscal and administrative decision making from national to provincial and local jurisdiction and responsibility, on ostensive models of school and university autonomy and privatization. These in turn are weighted against a performative focus on accountability. In this model, educational system performance can be quantitatively benchmarked in relation to the overarching goals of the increased and more equitable production of new human capital, which in turn can be assessed vis a vis correlation with improvement in traditional metrics of employment, intergenerational social and economic mobility, GDP, gender equity, and so forth.

Yet the move from grand policy narrative to regional and local implementation is always fraught. As Wu's discussion of the concept of *suzhi* illustrates (Chapter 5), many of the central axioms of reform are subject to complex cultural and historical mediation and translation. Further, these official policy discourses travel into the "hinterland" of Qiandongnan, Wu documents their local uptake in the context of longstanding Miao and Dong cultural histories and practices. Wu's analysis models the key problematics in educational reform and policy analysis: first, the degree to which official discourse, however coded and broadcast from centre to margins, consists of a series of "floating signifiers" (i.e., *suzhi*), that are subject to not only the eccentricity of local discourse practice, but, in this case, to the resilience and power of Indigenous minority cultures. Wu's point is that, whatever its intents, the discourses of market-based reform are leading to "fragmented" and "messy" local uptakes, with mixed educational effects on both students and teachers, communities and schools. We encounter a very different picture of the local uses of policy in Yochim's (Chapter 20) study of 15 families in an "aspirational" city of Shijiazhuang. Here Yochim documents how families in the growing middle class are building and exchanging cultural, economic and social capital in the new Chinese cityscape of intense urban high rise development, expanded transportation and commercial infrastructure, and new levels and kinds of state and private educational provision.

Turning to Chinese higher education, Wang and Chan (Chapter 10) here describe a "controlled decentralization" of the system that enabled the opening of new private and semi-private institutions. In their framing of higher education reforms, Yan, Mao and Zha (Chapter 12) term the approach one of "Chinese-style Market preserving federalism", describing a local "promotion tournament" system that uses performative metrics to create incentives for provincial officials. The approach to a centrally-driven fiscal decentralization, they argue, creates a host of ambiguous outcomes, including the increase in gaps between provincial performance on equity indicators.

These are not just archetypal cases of what philosopher Michel Foucault (1972) once described as the “eccentric” local uptake of discourse. They are as well empirical questions framed by actual geographic and demographic diversity and scale. The chapters here can only begin to capture the geographic/spatial diversity and cultural/linguistic heterogeneity of China and Chinese education. In this regard, the educational policy questions are in part framed by a larger historic challenge of Chinese national heterogeneity and diversity: about how to constitute and maintain social cohesion and political continuity in the face of large-scale population growth and movement, ongoing urbanization, cultural, demographic and linguistic diversity, and an uneven distribution and concentration of resources and wealth. The point is that the questions of scale and implementation faced by Chinese educational reform are by definition extensions of the core question around national integrity, identity and unity that spans Chinese history. Particularly since 1949, national governance has been seen to entail, *inter alia*, the extension and standardization of language and writing systems and the promulgation of national ideology and history through universal education. These historical dynamics of scale, place, cultural history and national ideology arguably make China an exceptional case in contemporary educational policy.

I make this point as a corrective to the current enterprise of cross-national comparison of the performance of education systems and universities and its affiliated industries of PISA, TIMSS, Times Higher Education Supplement, the Web of Science and so forth. Led by a perennial search for the ‘right’, universal educational model, the Western pursuit of “Shanghai model” (or Finland, Singapore and Korea, for that matter) as an exemplar of generalizable practice is, at best, scientifically naïve, and at worst, spurious and misleading (Luke, 2011). And the studies here show how educational systems reform and the relationships between policy discourses and local effects are wholly contingent upon the interplay of national ideologies and political economies, demographics and geographies of scale, on the one hand, and heterogeneities and diversities of culture and place, on the other.

There is no doubt that China is undergoing major policy shifts that are broadly premised on a still emergent models of state-regulation of quasi-markets. But for me the underlying theme of *Spotlight on China* is that despite all systemic efforts to calibrate and control policy with fidelity to its intents – local stories happen. It is in these face-to-face, everyday institutional lives that the new China, its diverse human beings, their labor and artifacts, ideas and beliefs are being constructed. One of the responsibilities of educational research is to document these local effects, and then, as this volume does, assemble them into a broader sociological overview and framework, searching for key and recurrent social and material relations of power, continuities and discontinuities of discourse, lived human equalities and inequalities, and, indeed, enabling institutional sites and practices. I was struck by the simplicity and clarity of Loren Yochim’s observation: “One of the difficulties of researching and trying to find plausible explanations for the shape and texture of Chinese society and culture is the extraordinarily rapid pace of change. Descriptions accurately made

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are quickly outdated as policy changes in response to economic and social pressures” (p. 345). For the moment, then, *Spotlight on China* provides a state of the art picture: dynamic, partial, full of contradictions and tensions, and, as we speak, in movement and local reconfiguration.

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