

# The Last 15 Years of Western Studies on Chinese Education - A Research Note

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A new epoch in Western studies on Chinese education commenced, as it happened in many other fields of research on China, with the implementation of momentous reforms in 1978. The Chinese educational system which had deteriorated during the "Cultural Revolution" changed dramatically following important statements made by Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s.<sup>1</sup> Structural reorganization of the entire educational system as well as revisions of curriculum and teachings methods were undertaken thereby also converting the focus of Western research to novel fields of Chinese education. Moreover, the openness that accompanied the reform era made new resource materials available enabling Western scholars to produce more sound scholarship and stimulating new research approaches.<sup>2</sup> The last 15 years of studies on Chinese education have thus included various new aspects of the educational system in China. However, large research fields are still uncovered, leaving us with only a partial impression and understanding of Chinese education and its importance for contemporary Chinese society.

Western studies on Chinese education from the early years of the People's Republic until the mid-1970s all relied heavily on official policy documents as their main source. In this period the Chinese political situation prohibited the presence of European or American researchers, making it impossible to observe the educational process from the inside or to supplement official sources with participants' contributions. The dogmatic nature of the available source material evidently restricted research to a basic theoretical understanding of the *intended* socialist educational policy and school structure. Not unexpectedly, Western publications in this period are characterized

by comprehensive volumes of official documentary materials translated into English, supplemented by short essays on the Chinese educational system.<sup>3</sup>

During the early 1970s, Western scholars were allowed to make short visits to China, but their observations were more than often biased, due to the restrictions put on them by their Chinese host institutions. The increasing hospitality of the Chinese thus did not significantly improve Western scholarship on education, which continued to rely on official documents. One consequence of taking formal documents at face value was a simplified interpretation of a "two-line-conflict" as the fundamental axis in educational policy.<sup>4</sup> Expectations among Western scholars of the accomplishments of the Chinese educational revolution for the moulding of society furthermore contributed to a more than positive attitude towards China.

By the mid-1970s, Chinese official policies had changed in such a way as to favour Western research. Scholars were allowed more direct contact with their objects of investigations and were treated more leniently. This became evident in Western publication of Chinese educational documentation, which now could be supplemented by transcriptions of tape-recorded interviews made in China.<sup>5</sup> Compilations of documentary materials as presented in the translation series *Chinese Education* also changed and became more nuanced in regard to the assorted subject areas.<sup>6</sup> The concentration on documents concerning revolutionary education and commentaries on educational work by political leaders decreased, but the influence of politics on education was still reflected in the documents selected for translation.

The political situation in China in the 1970s, however, did not allow foreign scholars to conduct extensive field work on their own. Instead empirical research was based on interviews with the growing number of refugees coming from China to Hong Kong. Interviews with former "Red Guard" activists, students under the "Cultural Revolution," and the availability of more informal publications now revealed a considerably more complex picture of Chinese educational policy and practice.<sup>7</sup>

The possibility for Western scholars to come closer to and interact with their object of study increased as China opened its doors even more widely in the 1980s. It was no longer necessary to rely

exclusively on the controversial refugee-informants in Hong Kong, but with certain restrictions field work in situ was allowed to be conducted by Westerners. Nonetheless, in the field of educational studies the new opportunities for conducting extensive research on Chinese soil, getting into closer contact with Chinese researchers in the field of education, and the availability of massive amounts of material published at provincial or lower levels, are not reflected in the general approach to Chinese education.

Scholars seem to find it difficult to part with older methods, and the influence of former years of observing the transformation of the educational sector through official resource material has been maintained. This does not mean that research is as confined as in the earlier periods described above, but that the reliance on official resource material still is disproportionate with the available material from less formal national organs. Studies should not primarily rely on the official mouthpieces of the State Commission of Education, e.g., *People's Education* (Renmin jiaoyu) or *Chinese Education Daily* (Zhongguo jiaoyu bao). These journals contain national educational policy documents and reports on models of educational development as well as models of educational mismanagement, which serve the purpose of emphasizing certain policy decisions and should be treated as such. Reports in local educational journals published at county or city level, on the other hand, can often be more informative and reliable in regard to the actual state of affairs. Articles published at this level might be considered less policy oriented since these publications also serve the purpose of being the mutual communication organ of educational institutions in a certain area.

The novel opportunity to examine the educational system in practice or undertake field work is unfortunately often reduced to the mere conducting of formal cadre interviews for the purpose of collecting quantitative data. Field work in the sense of using an anthropological research method, where observations of the process of schooling, is the main objective is rarely taking place. Several reasons exist for this restrained research practice, such as limited access to student interviewing and to schools not being considered as models, but one should still be aware of the restrictions in the use of official interviews and the influence on the choice of research subjects.

In the following broad categorization of Western research on Chinese education in the 1980s, I intend to delineate the major research trends, not mentioning all studies on Chinese education, but singling out specific and suggestive studies. A point of reference for the latest state of research on education is Irving Epstein's comprehensive compilation of essays entitled *Chinese Education: Problems, Policies, and Prospects*, published in 1991.<sup>8</sup> In this volume of more than 500 pages, including 16 essays by American researchers, a wide range of educational subjects is treated. Three main aspects are covered: 1) a historical overview with analyses of the structure of the school system, 2) formal educational programs in primary, secondary and tertiary education, and 3) the particular educational situation in, e.g., special economic zones, programs for disadvantaged youth, professional education, administration of education, and political education.<sup>9</sup> This broad division of issues corresponds largely to the investigations of Chinese education seen in other recent works.<sup>10</sup>

## Research on Higher Education

With respect to the first aspect above, the historical perspective on Chinese education has been emphasized by, among others, Ruth Hayhoe and Suzanne Pepper. This approach, deviates from earlier works in which the educational policy more often was placed in a socialist frame of reference.<sup>11</sup> Hayhoe has furthermore contributed with studies of the influence of Western educational thoughts on Chinese education in the 20th century, especially regarding the concept of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> Still, to her Chinese education and educational values is principally culturally determined, as she states: "The contribution of Western scholarly values and patterns to China's cultural modernization was, in my opinion, secondary to a dynamic of change located within Chinese society."<sup>13</sup>

Hayhoe focuses in her approach primarily on the historical and cultural dynamics as important constituents of higher education in China and less on the direct influence of policy decisions on education. Other scholars have conducted more empirically oriented

studies on Chinese higher education by empirical studies on the structure of higher education.<sup>14</sup> The historical perspective and the results of several empirical studies of higher education have made it possible to use the results from studies in China in comparative studies on education in other societies or countries.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to research on secondary and primary education, research on higher education is voluminous. This scholarly focus might not be surprising since the interest in Chinese intellectuals and their role in society is a continuous important research theme of Western sinology. Yet, primary and secondary education compose the base of the educational structure and are as such crucial for the general understanding of education in China.

## **Research on Pre-School and Primary Education**

In Epstein's collection on Chinese education the subject of kindergarten and primary school is discussed primarily in Delia Davin's contribution "The Early Childhood Education of the Only Child Generation in Urban China."<sup>16</sup> Davin focuses primarily on childhood socialization, which is a controversial issue recurrently capturing the interest of scholars in relation to contemporary social conditions in China. In the 1960s and 1970s socialization of Chinese children was predominantly studied in the context of political culture.<sup>17</sup> This changed in the 1980s as the "one child policy" was implemented, becoming a decisive factor in the socialization of Chinese children. In the fairly limited number of studies of childhood socialization in the 1980s, the "one child policy" has been made the matter of primary focus both by Westerners and by their Chinese counterparts.<sup>18</sup>

The concentration on the issue of the "one child policy" in regard to socialization has certain drawbacks. The attention given to primary schooling as a socializing factor and to the process of learning seems to have been downgraded. Moreover, since the "one child policy" is being carried out most successfully in urban areas, the situation regarding childhood socialization in the countryside does not to the same degree draw the attention of Western scholars.

General studies on primary education have been carried out throughout the 1980s. They have mainly focused on enrollment figures as a measure for the success of the reforms carried out since 1978 and the structural changes in relation to administration and financing of the educational sector at this level.<sup>19</sup> The specific situation in the rural areas, where the major part of China's youngsters receive their education, has until now been only sporadically covered.<sup>20</sup> This may be due to the fact that obtaining permission to conduct research in rural areas is more difficult and the research itself more demanding than in urban areas. Furthermore, the rural responsibility system has led to uneven regional development, which hampers generalizations, possibly making rural education a less attractive field for research.

The negative consequences of decentralization in production and administrative structure as a part of the reforms in the Chinese countryside are becoming increasingly visible in the educational sector. The situation is characterized by a spiralling number of drop-out students, the closing of primary schools, an increasing number of teachers leaving the teacher corps, etc. There is therefore a need for in-depth local studies of the impact of the reforms on the educational system in the countryside. Investigations on site or analyses of local resources would contribute considerably to a broadening of our understanding of the consequences of rural reforms and the development of Chinese education.

The focus on pre-school and primary education, whether urban or rural, in the context of institutional structure and economic development, is of course necessary, but should proceed further to include aspects concerning the process of learning. In the 1980s, Western scholars have considered education as a component of the developmental process, thereby partially adhering to the Chinese educational media where quantifiable records of educational development is being emphasized. Accentuating these elements draw attention away from the core of the educational system, namely what is taking place inside the Chinese schools. Important changes in curriculum have been taking place since 1978, but curriculum studies concerning preschools and primary schools have rarely been undertaken. Not only is information on the content of teaching materials inadequate, but also the issue of communication

of knowledge in Chinese schools is rarely pursued in Western scholarship. The development of pedagogical theories following changes in curriculum after the "Cultural Revolution" and studies of pedagogy have only been sporadically commented on.<sup>21</sup>

Irving Epstein has in a recent article applied the methods of the adherents of "critical pedagogy" to curriculum and teaching issues in Chinese education.<sup>22</sup> This conceptual framework could prove useful for the understanding of the theory and practice of curriculum and pedagogy in China, but Epstein's article also shows the difficulties of applying Western theories to the Chinese context. This calls upon more research on Chinese education in a comparative perspective.

Anita Chan has, in her research on the generation of youngsters growing up during the "Cultural Revolution," argued that the most important agent of socialization is the school, while the family is of minor importance.<sup>23</sup> The influential role of the schools on the students during the "Cultural Revolution," which was a period dominated by politics and ideology even at the lowest level of society, seems convincing. Though the schools have become less politicized in the 1980s, there is reason to believe that the socialization of students still primarily takes place in the setting of the school and to a lesser degree in the family. In understanding the socialization process of students today, we thus should concentrate not only on the consequences of the "one child family," but more on the schooling process both in respect to curriculum, pedagogical substance, and to acquisition of knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

## Research on Secondary Education

The above description of research preferences with respect to primary education is also valid for studies on secondary education. There is an inclination to illuminate the institutional structure of secondary education as opposed to the process of teaching and learning. The chapter on secondary education by Heidi Ross in Epstein's anthology is characteristic of the general approach of studies on this aspect of the educational system.<sup>25</sup> Starting from the

most conspicuous element of contemporary Chinese education the author accounts for the stratification in secondary schools manifested by the existence of "priority schools" or "key schools" where the scarce resources are concentrated. She then points to the continuous, firm Chinese belief in the principle of "priority schools," which in the beginning of the 1980s have had the side effect of the creation of a vocational track in higher and lower middle school. The division into academic and vocational tracks brings forth the question of equality in educational opportunity. Finally, from the perspective of the rapidly changing society towards consumerism, Ross discusses the conflict between this and the teaching of socialist morality in the Chinese middle schools.

The pattern of themes Ross addresses in the abovementioned article is similar to that of most general works on secondary education.<sup>26</sup>

The reason why there is an emphasis on "priority schools" and the university entrance examination is probably because the establishment of these schools and examinations constitute the clearest structural change in relation to the educational system during the second half of the 1960s and 1970s. The restoration of elite education and the "priority-school model" can be traced back to political debates about mass contra elite education which took place before the founding of the People's Republic of China. As such educational policy is an important aspect of the development of the present educational system and studies of policies contribute to the perception of the general formation of the Chinese educational scheme.<sup>27</sup>

There is, however, no reason for neglecting the concrete social consequences of the reintroduction of academic selection criteria on educational opportunity. The Chinese discussion on the hierarchical school structure has been limited to the competitive aspect of the two-track educational system and to the dissatisfaction with the concentration of resources to specific schools. Themes of reproduction in education and society are rarely debated in the Chinese educational literature of the 1980s.<sup>28</sup> Nevertheless, social problems are obviously inherent in this highly elitist educational system and demand further investigation.<sup>29</sup> Here, where Chinese educationalists stop, Western researchers could more intensively take over and

study this important aspect of the educational system with implications for education as well as for the structure of Chinese society.

A side-effect of the implementation of the highly stratified and academic educational system has been the reintroduction of a vocational track to absorb the students who are not found qualified for the university preparatory curriculum in the higher middle schools. New categories of vocational schools are being added to existing secondary technical schools (*zhuan ye xuexiao*), and skilled workers' schools (*jigong xuexiao*) are being revived with the intention of a development in enrolment corresponding to that of the higher secondary schools. In 1992, this aim has on a national scale nearly been realized, and vocational education makes up a significant component in the general institutional picture of secondary education.

Of the few works on vocational education in contemporary and historical China, German studies stand out. This is perhaps not surprising, since Germany from the beginning of this century has inspired vocational training programs in China.<sup>30</sup> Münch and Risler's studies on vocational education in China based on visits to vocational schools in China reflect the diversity and decentralized planning of these institutions. Since the schools are without nationally developed curricula, national rules for the institutional and educational structure research on this section of the educational system is extremely complicated. For the comprehension of the development of vocational education in China and the importance of this educational sector for the quality of the workforce and the economic development we thus have to base our studies primarily on local investigations and observations.<sup>31</sup>

Vocational education in China moreover needs to be researched more in its own right and less as simply the adverse effect of the hierarchical educational system. Vocational education might contribute to an improvement of the labour force and thus prove to be of direct importance for the economic development of the country. In this respect, although European vocational programs repeatedly are emphasized in Chinese educational journals as models, more focus on the progress of vocational education on Taiwan could be relevant for the understanding of vocational training and its importance for modernization in a Chinese cultural

setting.<sup>32</sup>

## Concluding Remarks

Several well-researched general accounts of the Chinese educational system have appeared during the last decade.<sup>33</sup> These descriptions and analyses have focused primarily on the formal educational system, whereas informal education and special issues relating to education, such as moral education and gender questions, have been treated separately on a more modest scale. The comprehensive studies are typically painted with a broad brush and concern themselves with national standards and conditions. Reasons for this particular approach have been accounted for above, together with the tendency to disregard local cases and to emphasize institutional structures as opposed to the educational process itself. The national perspective that predominates in most of these studies continues to be problematic because of the superficiality and the universality deduced from statistics and sparse remarks from Chinese educational journals. Several methodological questions concerning ambiguities in the educational resource material is rarely discussed and much data remain unreliable and inconsistent and need to be more carefully examined than is frequently the case.<sup>34</sup>

Quantitative data can be made the object of cross checking and can be employed with reservations, whereas the validity of qualitative data deduced from Chinese educational journals is extremely difficult to assess. The political situation after 1989 has undoubtedly made Western scholars more critical of and meticulous in their choice of Chinese source material, but we still need to know more about the current situation of educational research conducted by Chinese scholars in order to use such material.<sup>35</sup> Hubert O. Brown states in one of the few articles on the subject of educational studies in China: "Political considerations were, and continue to be, of paramount importance . . . the future international significance of educational research in China is in some doubt."<sup>36</sup> Studies of the conducting of educational investigations and analyses in China, together with close relationships with Chinese colleagues, can secure

a more competent usage of available source material and greater scientific rigour.

Research based on reliable data and complemented with local studies improves the prospects of placing the case of Chinese education in a comparative perspective. Inquiries into Chinese educational aspects can be enhanced and broadened if a comparison with the educational situation in other countries is undertaken. However, a comparative approach to Chinese education is rendered difficult by the particular case of Chinese culture and the specific kind of socialism developed in China. The major part of Western studies of Chinese education in a comparative framework has thus tended to regard education in China in a cross-cultural context as *sui generis*. Comparisons of the Chinese situation with countries of related cultural or political conditions regarding education is rarely seen.<sup>37</sup>

In Carnoy and Samoff's study *Education and Social Transition in the Third World* the particularity of the Chinese cultural tradition evidently restrains the latter method of direct comparison, albeit the comparison takes place within the typology of socialist states as "transition states." The principal factors shaping the "transition state" according to Carnoy and Samoff are a powerful state bureaucracy, a legacy of a capitalist state, a counterrevolutionary foreign military intervention, and the capitalist world economy.<sup>38</sup> It may be open to question how far these factors constitute the dominant elements shaping the socialist transition path of China, and one could argue they are more appropriate for the countries included for comparison: Cuba, Tanzania, Mozambique, and Nicaragua. Fortunately the authors have, each in their own field, worked conscientiously, and they all consider decisive cultural traditions. Still, this volume illustrates clearly the difficulties of comparative educational research in the case of China.

The obstacles of bringing Chinese education into a comparative framework should, nevertheless, not paralyse Western scholarship or cause Western researchers to refrain from considering comparative methodologies for Chinese circumstances. In fact, interesting attempts to examine the basis for comparative studies in the case of China have been made.<sup>39</sup> The issue of comparative education needs more reflection than has so far been undertaken,

but as has become apparent from the above description of the state of scholarship on education in China, the limitations of a comparative approach to education, is not limited to the problems concerning the "special case of China." In both Hayhoe's and Epstein's articles theories of comparative education approaches are considered for the study of higher education in China. That both articles are dealing with higher education is no coincidence since this part of the educational experience in China is the most thoroughly documented both in respect to empirical and historical studies. To make the educational system of China an object of study for comparative educationalists it is thus strongly needed to enhance both empirical and historical studies of Chinese formal and informal primary and secondary education along the lines depicted above.

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## NOTES

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