

# Higher Education Reforms in China and their Stakeholders: An Analysis of the Changing Roles of Losers and Winners

Rui Yang  
University of Hong Kong

*BRICS Recent Trends in Higher Education: Analysis around  
the Pact between Higher Education and Society  
University of Campinas, Sao Paulo, Brazil  
7-9 November 2012*

## Introduction

- Equality has become a major goal of education around the world.
- China's government professes its commitment to equality, and has taken a variety of steps to provide at least basic education to its citizens.
- Globalisation affecting China's policy priorities in education, and has transformed the discursive terrain within which educational policies are developed and enacted.
- Effects of globalisation on social and educational equality between different communities vary greatly within China, creating enormous disparities among people.

# Major Policy Shifts, 1950s-1970s (i)

- ***Different educational rights for different social groups***: limiting those from the exploiting and non-labouring class family background from receiving higher education and upward social mobility.
- ***Elite emphases***: focus on major capital cities and science and technology subjects, imbalanced distribution of educational resources, damages to the majority people's educational rights, and educational gaps between urban and rural areas.
- ***'Educational Revolutions'***: attention to the educational rights of working people's children, especially in rural areas through smashing up examinations, shortening length of schooling, relaxing the limits for university entry, and devolving administrative power to lower levels of government to utilise multiple sources and methods, causing damage to the majority people's educational rights and injustice of other sorts.

## Major Policy Shifts, 1950s-1970s (i)

- A strong Chinese tradition that higher learning only belonged to those of high class.
- In higher education, the percentage of students from workers and peasants was increased “from 20.5% in 1952 to 55.28% in 1958, and reached to 71.2% in 1976.”
  - Ma, H.M., & Gao, X.P. (1998). *Educational Sociology Research*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Publishing House.

## Paradigm Changes since the 1980s

- ***Discriminatory Xianfu theory***: “Allow some people and areas to get rich first,” accelerates income gap between urban and rural areas and among different social groups.
- ***Policy arrangements along the market Line***: Educational reforms are lined with those in economic sector to establish close links between education and the market has been the most prominent orientation.
- ***Pronounced effects on the equity of educational expenditures***: China’s paltry educational spending, in proportion to its GDP, is distributed very unevenly especially between rural and urban areas.

## **Social Effects of Recent Education Reforms (i)**

- Urban-rural inequalities in HE are most pronounced: on average the difference of educational opportunities between urban and rural areas was 5.8 times nationwide, with 8.8 and 3.4 times respectively in national and provincial universities.
- An inverted pyramid shape of the disparities among different social strata in Chinese higher education: the more prestigious the institutions are the lower percentage of the rural students is.

## Social Effects of Recent HE Reforms (ii)

- The opportunities for peasants to send their children to ordinary Chinese higher education institutions in comparison to workers, civil servants, businesspeople and professionals were proportionately 1:2.5:17.8:12.8:9.4. They turn into 1:4:31.7:22.6:17.4 for the opportunities to send their children to national first-tier institutions.
- Another study shows that rural children are 5.6 times less likely to be able to receive higher education than their urban counterparts.

# Major Chinese Policy Documents

- ***Decision on the Reform of China's Educational Structure*** (1985)
- ***Outline of China's Education Reform and Development*** (1993)
- ***Ninth 5-Year Plan for the Nationwide Education Cause and Development Programs for the Year of 2010*** (1996)
- ***Program of Educational Revitalization for the Twenty-first Century*** (1998)
- ***Tenth 5-Year Plan for the Nationwide Educational Cause*** (2002)
- ***2003-2007 Action Plan for Invigorating Education*** (2004)
- ***Outline of the Eleventh 5-Year Plan for the Development of Nationwide Education Cause*** (2007)
- ***Outline of State Plans for Medium and Long-term Reform and Development of Education*** (2010)

## **These documents demonstrate (i)**

- Chinese government's response to national needs and global pressures on the higher education sector.
- Dominated by significant themes identified by Chinese government, including international competition, introduction of the socialist market economy, knowledge economy, human capital, and social construction.
- These themes form the milieu for the reform of China's higher education sector.

## These documents demonstrate (ii)

- Chinese government's endeavours to address problems of educational discrimination can be traced back to the early 1990s.
- Notion of equity in education first appeared in government documents in 2006.
- Before 2003, educational equality values were missing in Chinese education policy making, as economic interest and discourses played a dominant role in setting the policy agenda.
- Although not a driving imperative yet, educational equality has become a major issue.
- Chinese government has made plans to address educational inequality in rural, regional and ethnic minority areas in the next 10 years.
- Issues of educational equity with regard to social class and gender are still not incorporated in the vision of Chinese policy makers.

# Foci of China's Policy for Educational Inequality

- Educational equity for ethnic minority students and disabled students was reflected in all major government documents.
- Most of the texts were mainly located in Chinese basic education.
- Texts about education for ethnic minority students and disabled students did not use the key words of equity, equality, fairness and justice.
- Education policy documents with regard to ethnic minority students and disabled students were mainly based on considerations of Chinese macro-ethnic-minority policy and their basic human rights.

# China's HE Policy as a Result of Multiple Forces

- Western and traditional Chinese sets of discourses are blended with each other, with “no clear divide between the so-called Chinese and Western traditions.”
- Interactions between the two:
  - Western values and discourses are inevitably reinterpreted and adapted when they are introduced into Chinese context.
  - Indigenous Chinese traditions undergo transformation and reinvention when interacting with Western cultures.
- Complexity of HE policy in China is a result of multiple forces that underpin the governing model of Chinese higher education.

# Conceptualizing Present Chinese Governance (i)

- With transition from a state-planned system to a socialist market economy system, Chinese forms of administration experienced profound changes, evident in a hybrid socialist-neoliberal form of government that has emerged since 1978.
- Authoritarian styles of government create docile labourers, while neoliberal styles of government constitute active and entrepreneurial citizens.
- Direct government intervention is mixed with market mechanisms.

## Conceptualizing Present Chinese Governance (ii)

“One-party rule increasingly is achieved through recourse to a rule of law and associated conceptions of citizenship, as well as through governmental interventions that seek to govern certain subjects from a distance, by relying on their individual choices, aspirations or capacities” (Jeffreys and Sigley 2009).

# End Remarks

- During China's past 6 decades of so-called socialist construction, higher education policy has experienced dramatic paradigm shifts in line with the nation's transformation from a planned to a market economy.
- Priority in education policy has been shifted from equity to efficiency that is measured, almost exclusively, in financial terms.
- As China's governance transform from one mode to another, new winners and losers have been created, often with the former far outnumbered by the latter.

Thank you for listening!

Email: [yangrui@hkucc.hku.hk](mailto:yangrui@hkucc.hku.hk)