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EDUCATION IN CHINA ——

Philosophy, Politics and Culture

Janette Ryan

polity

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4 Inequalities and Disparities

China's market reforms from the late 1970s have markedly improved its economy, enabling vast increases in educational provision and resources, but they have changed the education system from a redistributive to a market-driven one leading to increased and growing inequalities in educational access and attainment across the country. Inequality exists right through the education system, with widening gaps between urban and rural areas, rich and poor, and between 'mainstream' and disadvantaged groups of students including ethnic minority students, migrant students, and students with disabilities. These gaps are particularly evident at the senior high school and higher education levels and occur across several dimensions.

This chapter discusses why, despite measures by governments and the educational improvements for many not just since 1980 but since 1949, China's recent vast economic and social development has not led to equal improvements in education for all and has led to disadvantage for some.

Although public education expenditure has been increasing in recent years – by an average of 19 percent per year from 2006 to 2016 (OECD 2016) – this is occurring within the context of the decentralization of educational management and resource allocation, which has resulted in the burden of dramatically increased educational costs shifting to provincial and local governments and individuals, who have differing capacities to pay. According to Li and Yang (2013), the average yearly cost of attending university and living on campus was greater

than the average Chinese family income, and this is made worse by the fact that:

> Students from better-off urban families are well prepared to enter high-quality public universities which are also the cheapest, while much disadvantaged rural students are more likely to attend poor-quality second-tier or private institutions which charge high fees. (p. 317)

Since the late 1990s, substantial sums have been allocated to the 'elite' research universities in an effort to make them among the top-ranking universities worldwide. All governments want their higher education institutions to be among the best in the world, and the goal of providing extra funding to 'top tier' universities is not equality but improving quality and international prominence. However, such policies have consequences for individuals and run counter to other public policies such as poverty alleviation and improving educational access.

The reform of education is occurring against a backdrop of increasing social and economic divides as a consequence of the economic reform policies of the 1990s which have led to significant inequalities in educational provision and resourcing in different parts of the country. The massive rise in private and international education providers also means that inequalities even within the wealthiest and largest urban areas are increasing and, although the population is becoming better educated and wealthier, the rural–urban and rich–poor gaps are widening and divisions between 'the increasingly cosmopolitan elite and the rest' are rising (Vickers & Zeng 2017, p. 143). In the education sphere, this divide is stark. In 2007 Hannum and Park noted that 'parents with money can increasingly buy their way into schools with better climates, more resources, and a more qualified teaching staff' regardless of the child's academic ability (Hannum & Park 2007, p. 15) and this is even more the case today. At the other end of the spectrum are the children of migrant workers in urban centres and those left behind in villages when their parents migrate to cities to find work, who fall 'under the radar' and may receive among the least education and fewest resources of any group.

It is difficult to get a full and accurate picture of educational inequality in China. Rong and Shi (2010) state that government data 'usually lacks reliability, validity, and consistency, a function of unsophisticated data collection techniques, ambiguities in definition, misconceptions, and political manipulation of data collection and the publication process' (pp. 111–12). But much evidence is available about the continuing and growing comparative educational disadvantages being faced by many groups which have consequences for the continued strength and cohesion of Chinese society, occurring as they are in the midst of a general rise in resentment about burgeoning inequalities between rich and poor. China's *Gini coefficient* measuring income inequality was 0.467 in 2017, above the warning level set by the United Nations of 0.4, indicating severe income inequality, which, according to the Nikkei Asian Review (2018) 'imperils China's push for "quality" growth'. One percent of the population owns a third of the country's wealth (Leng 2017). Although there was some slight improvement in income inequality in the previous decade (Milanovic 2018), particularly between 2008 and 2015 (Nikkei Asian Review 2018), it is now on the rise again.

As we have seen, education has historically been the primary vehicle in China for economic mobility and social prestige. But in China's fast developing modern market economy, where resources and rewards are unevenly distributed, although education is now not the only means to power and wealth, it has nonetheless taken on an even greater role in the creation or reproduction of social and economic status and the opportunities afforded to young people. In 2007, Hannum and Park warned that 'economic advancement is increasingly tied to education in China' and market reforms have 'created a labor market that increasingly rewarded the highly educated' (p. 1). These trends have become even sharper in the decade since and unfair access to education is set to become an even greater source of resentment.

Although the CCP party-state espouses socialist values, and after the successes in expanding educational access in the socialist era, in recent decades educational access and achievement by different socio-economic groups has become more unequal and is accelerating. The rise of a middle class has seen the multiplying of 'elite' education programmes in schools, massive expansion of international and private schools, and huge investment by parents in their children's education, putting pressure on access to the most prestigious schools and universities and intense pressure on children to perform and achieve. This has led to a pervasive ethos of competition feeding 'rampant credentialism' (Vickers & Zeng 2017, p. 35).

China still has areas of real poverty, especially in rural and remote areas. As part of its poverty alleviation programme, in the *13th Five-Year Plan*, the central government pledged to improve educational funding, resourcing and infrastructure especially in the central and western regions. Yet as educational governance has become more decentralized over the past two decades, this has led to significant differentials in expenditure in provinces and even within local counties. The Plan includes measures aimed at evening out these discrepancies to some extent, but other factors also play a part in determining the life chances of China's young people, including the system of '*guanxi*' (关系) or social connections.

China is a country whose social fabric is strongly influenced by individuals' connections; business, family or personal. This is also the case in other countries but in China it is much more pronounced. Even in poorer areas, the well-connected can access better schools and afford to send their children to privately run services such as cram schools and after-school or weekend educational programmes and activities. '*Guanxi*', in Bourdieusian terms the social and cultural capital of parents, are important in accessing better schools and classes within a school and even to curry favour among teachers for their child (Xie & Postiglione 2016).

Educators, parents and students readily admit that educational access and success in China can be bought; those with money and influence can access the best schools, gain more teacher attention and better support for their children and even better grades. Measures taken by parents to gain the best opportunities for their children can be extreme. According to Yu (2014), 'Children of the rich routinely get into good public schools by donation, though schools conceal the practice by leaving these children's names off the roster' (p. 4). Parent donations to obtain admission for their children at top schools and universities are not unknown in other countries but in China, as Yu (2014) says, such current circumstances have led to the rise of a 'parentocracy', meaning that educational opportunities depend not so much on a child's abilities or efforts but on the wealth and desires of their parents.

URBAN AND RURAL EDUCATION

Since 1978 education, like almost everything else in China, has moved from central planning and control to marketization, commercialization and decentralization. This has been a key element in explaining why the overall increased wealth of the country has not led to equal outcomes in education, even though governments have made efforts in recent years to address this.

Some of the most severe inequalities exist between rural and urban areas. Gaps in educational attainment between rural students and their urban counterparts arise from a range of factors including family support, quality of infrastructure and facilities, and teacher skills and attitudes. Rural children are concentrated in the lower levels of basic education and their university admission rates are a fraction of those for urban students, at one percent compared with 14 percent (Wang, Dan 2011). Rural students have fewer years of schooling, lower levels of literacy and numeracy, lower examination results, and their learning may be monitored less frequently by teachers. In impoverished regions, girls often have fewer years of education and lower test scores than boys, especially in mathematics, which according to Sun, Liu and Sun (2015) 'very likely reflect the degree to which the family emphasis on boys' education surpasses that for girls' (p. 473). The preference in Chinese society for boys over girls is still marked and not just in rural areas. Selective abortion has led to an imbalance of males over females, and girls are less likely to receive the same levels of educational support as their male siblings in families where there is more than one child (Zhang 2016).

In addition, the government has been closing rural schools with fewer than 100 students. This means that even very young children have to travel long distances to get to school or have to board in schools often with poor facilities. It has also led to over-crowding of rural schools with reports of a stampede for places at one primary school in central Henan which killed one child and left 22 others injured (Wang & Li 2017).

Conditions and facilities at remote schools can be seriously lacking. In 2016 a story emerged of children from the Yi minority in a small impoverished community living in a mountainside hamlet in Sichuan Province who had to climb ninety minutes down and back up a cliff face on rickety wooden and vine ladders to get to and back home from school each day (Khomami 2016). A steel ladder was eventually installed by the government which considerably cut their travel time, but this story of a literal and metaphorical educational ladder was just one graphic example of some of the considerable hardships facing many rural students and the many continuing challenges for governments and communities in providing good educational provision especially in remote areas.

Another disadvantage for rural children is that the reformed curriculum is often designed for advanced urban students and curriculum and textbooks contain content unfamiliar to rural students. According to Wang (2011), they are also culturally biased, portraying rural ways of life as 'backward' compared with the 'modern' cities. Ethnic minority students can internalize these deficit messages of minority culture leading them to see their own cultures as backward.

Since 2007, the central government has introduced measures to improve rural education including free basic education tuition and textbooks, professional development funding for rural teachers, increased investment in school infrastructure, technologies and resources, preferential policies for higher education, and free tuition for teacher education students at six of the 'normal' (originally established for education/teacher training) universities and for teaching graduates who teach in rural areas. Other measures include financial incentives to increase student attendance and linking teacher salaries and promotion to students' attendance and test scores. Initiatives such as *Teach for China*, run by a non-government organization and modelled on the *Teach for America* programme, also encourage teaching graduates to teach in remote villages to address increasing shortages of qualified teachers in these communities. The results of all this can be seen in many rural areas. However, rural schools still have difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified teachers and improvements are patchy across different regions.

Although central and provincial governments have increased investment in early childhood education in recent years, significant differences remain in funding and investment between different areas. Large cities such as Shanghai now have a universal three years of early childhood education but poorer rural and remote provinces often have almost none. Under the *National Development Plan (2010 to 2020)* and the 2014 *Three-Year Action Plan for Early Childhood Education* the central government announced substantially increased investment in early childhood education in rural, remote and ethnic minority areas. But it is clear that broader social and economic developments mean that investment in this area of education, as in others, may be less effective than hoped in reducing inequalities.

The rural–urban education gap can be seen most clearly at the higher education level, with Li and Yang (2013) arguing that the disparities between higher education institutions in urban and rural areas are a fundamental source of China's educational inequalities. Research by the Rural Education Action Program, a collaboration between the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and several American universities, found that almost two-thirds of rural students drop out of school by Year 12 and only half of rural junior high school students proceed to senior high school (Stanford Rural Education Action Program 2016). Lower-performing rural students are 'eliminated' through the junior high examination, meaning that they cannot attend high school. Those who do continue to high school have to compete for university admission with urban students who have better access and opportunities.

The central government provides grants and subsidies to poorer provinces to improve educational access and quality, but since the 1980s responsibility for funding and delivering basic education has been devolved to the provincial or other local levels. Thus, education can depend on geographical location. Some provinces are poorer than others because of lower tax revenues, governments in different areas have different priorities and levels of effectiveness and efficiency, and some have elements of corruption. The vast majority of 'top-tier' schools and universities are located in cities in the developed east such as Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou.

But geographical location, or proximity to the main centres of power and capital in the east of the country, is not necessarily an indicator of wealth or poverty. Remote areas and borderlands often have rich natural resources. Vast deposits of minerals have been discovered in parts of Inner Mongolia, for example. The case of a city I visited in that region shows how governmental structures and policies can lead to idiosyncratic use of resources according to local priorities. In Ordos in

Inner Mongolia, a huge city grew up out of the Mongolian sands almost overnight after the discovery of coal and rare earth minerals used in mobile phones, and the local government invested large sums in developing educational resources. At the time, the local mayor was a former teacher and prioritized expenditure on education from the new wealth coming into the area from the mineral boom. The spending on infrastructure was further encouraged by a huge growth in new housing, built with private speculative investment, for the millions of residents it was thought the city would attract. The schools I visited there had beautiful playing fields made of artificial grass and state-of-the-art buildings and resources, on a par with top public schools in Beijing and Shanghai. The schools in Ordos were experiencing much success in creating innovative and effective teaching and learning approaches for their students through intensive teacher development. These facilities were built because one local government leader was interested in education, and in the context of speculative investment pouring into the city aiming to profit from the mining boom. The new schools showed how the decentralization of decision-making and funding often determine how educational resources are now distributed in China. Ordos has since been labelled a 'ghost town' due to the lack of people who came to populate the city and has become a sad symbol of the country's uneven development. It is also emblematic of the fact that educational opportunities can depend on the vagaries of local conditions and individuals' priorities.

Uneven conditions also exist in eastern 'developed' areas. Schools I have visited in large cities such as Beijing and Shanghai boast facilities that would be the envy of schools anywhere around the world and can also be among the most innovative in terms of curriculum and pedagogy. But not all schools in the eastern coastal regions are wealthy. One school that research colleagues visited in Shandong province several years ago, on the coast between Shanghai and Beijing, and ironically the birth place of Confucius, was so poor that the children had to bring in tables and chairs from home each year and take them home again at the end of year. There are fewer examples of such poor conditions in recent years due to increased investment by central and local governments, but there still exist impoverished schools in remote areas and China remains a country of uneven and patchy development. As we have seen in Chapter 3, poor infrastructure and resources do not necessarily reflect teaching pedagogies and these also differ markedly depending on school leadership and teacher professional development programmes. However, there are certain groups of students who are clearly facing multiple disadvantages, most of which do relate to geographical location.

In spite of improvements in access to schooling in rural areas since 1978, and significant public investment in rural education, as well as assistance from international agencies (such as the World Bank, UNICEF, UNESCO, the Asian Development Bank and the United Kingdom Department for International Development), and other overseas donors, inequality between rural and urban education is widening. Education in capital cities in rural provinces has improved vastly but remains limited in remote areas. But the urban–rural educational divide is also increasing as a result of China's rapid economic development and the unprecedented movement of rural workers to cities for work. The consequences of this for children and their education are examined in the following two sections.

'LEFT-BEHIND' CHILDREN

Over the space of a few decades, 250 million workers have moved from rural to urban China, making it the largest migration in human history and five times the size of the great migrations from Europe to the Americas in the nineteenth century. These migrants often do not take their children with them due to a number of systemic barriers arising from the *hukou* (户口) household registration system. This system, Vickers and Zeng (2017) argue, effectively enforces 'rural–urban apartheid' (p. 34).

The phenomenon of these 'left-behind' children (*liushuo ertong* 留守儿童) is a significant problem in rural areas. An estimated 58 to 60 million children are left behind in villages, with nearly a quarter of all rural children being raised by grandparents, relatives, neighbours or friends. These figures are based on a report by the All China Women's Federation in 2013 but a survey by the Ministry of Civil Affairs in 2016 put the total figure at eight million (due to differences in definition). There is agreement however, that whatever the true figure, this is a pressing problem due to the short- and long-term deleterious effects on the health and wellbeing of these children. Children tend to be left behind if they are younger, with parents of boys migrating for shorter periods. Although there is some evidence that rural workers are beginning to return home to set up businesses in provinces where economic conditions are improving (Sixth Tone 2018), millions of children still only see their parents during the annual Spring Festival holidays and Chinese media each year is full of heart-breaking stories of the sad farewells when parents leave again.

Parents leave their children behind for several reasons. The *hukou* household registration system means that they are not eligible for government benefits or services in the cities; parents work long hours in cities; and their children have been unable to sit senior high school and university entrance examinations away from their home province (Zhou, Murphy & Tao 2014). In 2014, the *hukou* system was slightly relaxed and some local governments have begun to allow migrant students to sit the *gaokao* in the province where they reside. But there are restrictions on this. In Guangdong province, for example, at least one parent must have a 'legal, stable residence and job, and must have held a residence permit and bought social insurance in Guangdong for at least three consecutive years' and the student must have completed their three years of senior schooling in the province (Xu 2016).

Although there appear to be no significant disparities in educational attainment between rural children who are left behind and those who move to cities with their parents, children left behind by migrating mothers (but not fathers) have lower levels of school engagement and younger children are especially vulnerable to disruption. There can be effects on left-behind children's physical and emotional wellbeing, including problems with self-esteem and social skills, and they are at greater risk of neglect, sexual assault, child abduction, child trafficking and committing crimes (Zhou, Murphy & Tao 2014; Naftali 2016).

As so many rural parents have left the countryside to work in cities, and entrusted the care of their children to others, demand for rural kindergarten places has soared, and there are severe shortages of teachers in this area. The care of young children was always a communal responsibility between adults in a village but villages now often have few working-age adults and mainly older people and large numbers of children remain. Even with increased investment from government, public provision is unlikely to keep up with increasing demand, and it will be the children of better-off urban families who will increasingly receive kindergarten education, while those in rural areas will struggle to do so. The movement away of working-age adults also means that less revenue is available for local governments and educational provision in these areas is put under pressure. Private, low-quality, provision is sometimes the only option – which has to be paid for by money sent back by absent parents.

According to the MOE, in 2015 only half of children in poorer areas had access to kindergarten with up to 16 million rural children between the ages of three and six having no preschool education at all. Rural kindergartens are mostly privately owned and often have inadequate resources or are poorly run. The deaths of four kindergarten children who had been left locked in school buses in severe heat, in separate incidents in July 2017, caused an outcry about the poor quality and lack of oversight of rural kindergartens (Cai Xin 2017).

Several counties in the western provinces are providing free early childhood education in response to this problem. Four counties in Shaanxi and Shanxi Provinces in central China provide three years of free early childhood education for children aged three to six in public and private kindergartens and preschool programmes in primary schools, resulting in enrolment rates of 92.4 percent in 2013 (Rao & Sun 2017). However, Li and Wang (2014) argue that many costs in this programme still fall on parents and there are continuing problems of accessibility, affordability, accountability and sustainability.

Parents often migrate to cities to have money to invest in their child's education. Many keep in contact though telephone calls or WeChat (a Chinese social media platform). But long distances, the costs of travel and few holidays mean that parents may rarely see their children. Lack of a parental presence can mean that children drop out of school early or may lack aspiration to go on to university (although many do). Students in poorer western and central provinces remain under-represented in the later years of schooling and in higher education (Naftali 2016). According to Gao (2014), the differences in educational opportunities for urban and rural students remain stark:

> While many of their urban peers attend schools equipped with state-of-the-art facilities and well-trained teachers, rural students often huddle in decrepit school buildings and struggle to grasp advanced subjects such as English and chemistry amid a dearth of qualified instructors.

Fewer rural students are admitted to elite universities such as Peking and Tsinghua and the figures are declining. Only 10 percent of students attending Peking University in 2014 were from rural areas compared with 30 percent in the 1990s (Gao 2014). Gao (2014) argues that despite increases in access to basic education and quadrupling of the number of university graduates in the previous decade, China has 'created a system that discriminates against its less wealthy and well-connected citizens, thwarting social mobility at every step with bureaucratic and financial barriers'.

MIGRANT CHILDREN

Joining left-behind children at the other end of the spectrum from privileged children in wealthy cities are migrant children in these same cities who accompany their parents in their search for work. In 2010 there were 36 million migrant children in cities, with 80 percent holding a rural '*hukou*' permit (Xu & Dronker 2016), representing a staggering estimated 30 percent of the child population in cities (Hu & West 2015). Due to the insecure and often seasonal nature of work for migrants, they often have to move to different parts of China (or are evicted), frequently at short notice, and their children's schooling can be seriously disrupted as, among other things, curriculum and pedagogy differ in different parts of the country. It is difficult for migrant workers to enrol their children in local public schools so children often have to either be sent home or receive no schooling at all.

Although government schools are required to admit them, there are often quotas, higher fees or they are simply refused admission. Many public schools don't have the capacity to enrol more migrant children. As they lack local residency permits, they must return to their home province to sit public junior high school and university examinations. Government reforms since 2012 aim to increase access to public schools for non-local *hukou* holders but progress has been limited (Xu and Dronker 2016) and migrant children do not have equal access to state education. A small number of 'quality' migrants are allowed to obtain local residency status, however, including those with qualifications, higher socio-economic status or those running larger businesses. These moves arise not from concerns to diminish disadvantages suffered by migrants but more from desires to take advantage of any benefits that they might bring to urban areas and populations. Administrative and financial barriers as well as discrimination also inhibit rural children's enrolment in public city schools and although not officially permitted, schools sometimes require them to have higher examination scores especially for schools that are over-subscribed (Hu & West 2015). Many children are forced to enrol in the private migrant schools run by migrants themselves or voluntary groups but these are often 'under the radar' and may not be legally registered, of poor quality, lack resources and qualified teachers, or be prohibitively expensive.

Migrant children can also face prejudice and segregation into separate classes in state schools (Hu & West 2015) or even separate playground areas. Teachers and other students can see them as 'lower quality' and may ostracize them for having 'dark skin or hometown accents and dialects' (Naftali 2016, p. 174). Local parents in urban areas are reluctant to send their children to schools with large numbers of migrant children, fearing that these children will have a negative impact on their own children. Migrant children can also receive less attention and support from teachers particularly if they are experiencing difficulties due to previous poor education quality (Hu & West 2015). Children at unlicensed migrant schools cannot join the Young Pioneers, which can be important for later career and other opportunities, as these schools have no official Party connection. Many parents express satisfaction with these migrant schools, however, and prefer their children to be among 'their own kind' (Naftali 2016, p. 164, citing Kwong, 2011).

Migrant workers are more likely to bring their sons with them to cities for a better education and to leave daughters behind due to gender discrimination. The *Annual Report on Left-Behind Girls in China's Rural Areas* in 2016 reported that 78.9 percent of parents in villages prefer to bring sons to larger cities for education, and if they can only afford to pay for one child's higher education, 97.5 percent choose sons over daughters (*China Daily* 2017d).

Although Beijing and Shanghai now allow migrant children into local senior high schools and vocational colleges and to sit the *gaokao* there, recent mass evictions of migrant workers in those cities mean that few can access that right. Populations in cities like Beijing have mushroomed, with Beijing's more than doubling in fifteen years, going from 10.1 million in 2000 to 20.4 million in 2015, with, according to Feng (2017), at least eight million people without a *hukou*. Hundreds of private schools for migrant children had been established on the outskirts of the city, not all legally, some operating for twenty years, but these are being demolished with the Beijing municipal authorities aiming to shut down all unlicensed migrant schools by 2020. The central government has announced plans to loosen the *hukou* system in some cities and grant permanent residency to up to 100 million migrant workers by 2020 but this will not include the over-populated 'first-tier' cities of Beijing and Shanghai.

These recent reforms to educational access for children of migrant workers, according to Gao (2014), are having 'only a tangential impact on levelling the playing field' and are lessened in effect by the numerous other, often informal or discriminatory barriers facing rural migrants trying to find education for their children:

> In Beijing, home to eight million migrant workers, preconditions for admission [to schools] seem intended less to promote educational equity than to exacerbate the discrimination. Some parents have switched jobs, sued the government and even engineered divorces to get around onerous documentation requirements, which often vary from district to district. Many urban migrants ultimately have no choice but to send their children back to their rural hometowns for inferior schooling. (Gao 2014)

The children of migrant workers, either those left behind or those brought to cities, whose parents have underpinned China's economic growth, are the collateral damage of decades of national development policies. With lower educational access and attainment rates they continue to be innocent victims of the increasing prosperity and stratification of Chinese society. Despite some attempts to address their problems, social forces and conflicting economic and social policies mean that they continue to suffer multiple layers of disadvantage and discrimination.

MINORITY EDUCATION

China is an ethnically diverse country with 55 recognized minority ethnic groups or 'nationalities' (*minzu* 民族) in addition to the majority *Han* ethnic group, and with 70 'mother tongues' (Wan & Jun 2008). Ethnic minority groups (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族) comprise nine percent of the population or around 105 million people (Zang 2015) and are scattered across China, mostly in the vast western, southwestern and northern areas. These areas comprise over 60 percent of China's territory, and although they are generally much poorer than the developed eastern coastal areas some are rich in natural resources. The five largest groups, each with populations of over ten million, are the Zhuang in Guangxi Province (bordering Vietnam), the Uyghur (located mainly in Xinjiang Province in the northwest), the Hui in Ningxia Province (in the central northeast), the Manchu (in the far northeast) and the Miao (in southern China). There are also Tibetans (living mostly in the Tibetan Autonomous Region but also in adjoining areas such as Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan provinces) and Inner Mongolians. There are five ethnic minority autonomous regions: Xinjiang, Tibet, Ningxia, Guangxi, and Inner Mongolia, as well as ethnic minority autonomous prefectures within Han regions throughout the country. Minority autonomous regions generally have more freedom in determining their own educational provision.

The concept attributed to Confucius of *minzu ronghe* (民族融合) or 'ethnic fusion' is used by the Chinese government to underpin and legitimize its policies on ethnic minority education. This concept is meant to signify unity through diversity; or the 'amalgamation or fusion of the Han majority and the non-Han minorities in a process of Confucian cultural diffusion' (Zang 2015, p. 19). Proponents of this notion such as Zang (2015) claim that it 'celebrates the idea of cultural, economic and political intermingling among ethnic and cultural groups, in order to promote assimilation and unity into a harmonious community' (p. 19). Notions of assimilation and integration recur in the literature reflecting the essential subservience of ethnic minority rights to the national purpose and the apparent paradox of promoting ethnic minority rights while privileging the unity of the nation both politically and socially. Many minority areas are in strategic border areas or in areas where separatist movements are found such as in Tibet and Xinjiang which are regarded by the party-state as a threat to national security and prosperity. Minority education, especially through citizenship education and 'ethnic solidarity education', is used to control and diffuse these tensions, to enlist political and ideological loyalty to the State and to foster 'ethnic plurality within national unity, but at the same time assimilating ethnic minorities into Han-dominated Chinese culture and socialist national identity as prescribed by the CPC [Communist Party of China]' (Law 2017, p. 253) and through the use of a 'Han-centric curriculum' (Vickers & Zeng 2017, p.143).

The concept of *minzu ronghe* is taught in civic or moral education classes in primary schools across the country and the longevity and comparative stability of Chinese civilization is attributed to this idea. The saying attributed to Confucius in the *Analects* of '*he'er butong*' (和而不同), which is often used as a basis for this, is 'harmony but not sameness'. This in fact referred to how 'gentlemen' behave, not how people from different ethnic groups should intermingle, and is yet another example of the appropriation of Confucian aphorisms to support contemporary agendas.

The central government has taken substantial measures to improve education for minorities, investing heavily in minority education since the 1950s and introducing policies to improve educational access for minority students in their regions or for those living or studying in other areas. Specific 'compensatory' measures since the 1980s include extra funding and resources from central and provincial governments, subsidies for local governments, free or subsidized textbooks, funding for minority students to attend schools in major cities, and classes for minority students in mainstream junior high schools. Extra funds have been provided for schools and infrastructure, training of ethnic minority teachers, and the establishment of boarding schools in remote or mountainous areas. Affirmative action policies for minority students include lower or no tuition fees, living expenses for students studying away from home, reserved places and lower admission scores for universities, and the option of sitting the *gaokao* in one of the six designated minority languages, including Tibetan, Uyghur, Mongolian, Korean, Kazak and Kirgiz.

National policies are designed to ensure access to the compulsory nine years of basic education for minority students, and overall attendance and literacy rates have risen markedly in recent decades, recorded at over 99 percent in 2012 (de Kloet & Fung 2017), though they still remain at lower levels than for the majority Han population, especially among the smaller minority groups (Zang 2015). The central government has also supported the development of minority language education, trained teachers of minority languages, and produced textbooks and other resources in minority languages. Some argue, however, that these policies are frequently violated by teachers and others, their implementation is often patchy, and market forces are undermining these protections (Banks 2014; Leibold & Chen 2014).

Minzu schools and universities are located in minority areas or in larger towns and cities across the country but recent decades have seen the centralization of minority education. Central schools have brought together teachers and resources from surrounding schools previously scattered at various smaller sites. Boarding schools have been established for students whose families live in very remote and isolated areas with no educational provision or who come from nomadic groups and are often located at large distances from children's homes and families. In Muslim areas, girls-only boarding schools have been established. Many regular boarding schools provide education in pastoral or agricultural subjects. Students in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region can attend an inland '*neidi*' (内地) boarding school for secondary education also often far from students' homelands. Yang (2017) argues that the *neidi* schools have provided secondary education for thousands of students, especially those from rural or nomadic families, providing pathways to tertiary study in inland cities, while some see them more as opportunities for aspirational families to join the 'minority elite' (Vickers & Zeng 2017, p. 61).

Most ethnic minority students live in rural areas or are children of migrants working in cities, so the disadvantages generally associated with being a rural or migrant student compound with additional layers of disadvantage experienced by ethnic minority groups to create multilayered handicaps. School enrolment, retention rates and examination results for minority students remain lower than for their Han counterparts, enrolment rates are lower for girls among some ethnic groups (Wan & Jun 2008; Naftali 2016) and there are high rates of truancy, failure, and dropouts at all levels (Leibold & Chen 2014). The *Compulsory Education Act* in 1986 mandated that nine years of basic education be gradually introduced across the country but this has not yet been fully implemented in all minority areas. Primary school attendance is a national priority but although official national dropout rates for primary school are only 0.2 percent, Lu et al.'s (2016) analysis of a dataset of 14,761 primary school children in northwest China found an estimated cumulative dropout rate of 8.2 percent.

Dropout rates among different minority groups may be influenced by a range of factors. Parents may not see the value of mainstream education or may see schooling as a threat to traditional values and ways of life (Wan & Jun 2008; Postiglione, Jiao & Goldstein 2011). Although out of pocket school expenses in rural education are now relatively low due to various funding schemes, opportunity costs for some groups, especially those with nomadic traditions, may inhibit school enrolment. Tibetan children often care for livestock, and their nomadic lifestyles and fear of erosion of cultural traditions can work against the perceived benefits of schooling (Postiglione, Jiao & Goldstein 2011). Mainstream schools may not be as sensitive to minority cultures and students can feel a disconnect between their school and family lives.

A dual education system (*eryuan jiegou* 二元結構) exists from preschool through to higher education. Minority students can choose to attend a mainstream Han (or *putong*) school, where instruction is in Mandarin (referred to as *min-kao-han* students), or a minority (*minzu*) school, where instruction, textbooks and materials are in both Mandarin and the minority language or languages (where students are referred to as *min-kao-min*), and teaching staff are mainly from the same ethnic group (Ma 2009; Wang, Lu 2017).

At the higher education level, ethnic minority students can choose to attend a mainstream university or one of 15 *minzu* universities located across China. *Gaokao* entry scores are lower and tuition is free for *min-kao-min* students studying minority-language medium (*minshou*) courses at some *minzu* universities. *Minzu* universities provide education for minority students; the study and preservation of ethnic minority languages, history and culture; and conduct research to improve economic and social development in minority areas. They were originally established to provide people from ethnic minorities with training as Party cadres to liaise between the central government and local people. They were initially organized on the Soviet model and were highly ideological and political, and still are, although they now have more autonomy. The central Minzu University of China in Beijing is considered the top minority university and five other national-level, centrally regulated *minzu* universities are located in the capital cities of Hubei, Sichuan, Gansu, Ningxia and Liaoning provinces. Nine local-government regulated *minzu* universities are located in Inner Mongolia (two), Guangxi, Yunnan, Hubei, Guizhou, Qinghai, Shanxi and Sichuan Provinces.

The quality of *minzu* schools and universities varies depending on location and whether they are centrally or locally funded and controlled. Schools in remote areas or poorer provinces may have only very rudimentary resources and parents provide basic items such as textbooks and equipment. Some *minzu* universities, especially in large cities such as Beijing and Lanzhou, are designated key national universities and receive more central funding and have higher admission scores than other *minzu* universities. Although there have been significant improvements in recent decades development is uneven across the country and many minority schools complain about having fewer, lower quality or outdated resources, and often struggle to recruit teachers (Ma 2009), especially those who speak minority languages and dialects. According to Ma (2007), one of the major challenges has been the mammoth task of translating texts across discipline areas into dozens of minority languages.

The dual education system provides benefits such as improved access for minority students and nurturing ethnic cultures but it can create difficult choices. Students who attend *min-kao-min* schools and courses in universities can find that their lower fluency in Mandarin can affect their later careers. Tang, Hu and Jin (2016) examined the relationship between educational attainment, Mandarin language proficiency and socioeconomic attainment of Muslim Uyghurs and their Han counterparts in Xinjiang Province. They found that although Uyghurs have the same number of years of education as the Han, their lesser fluency in Mandarin negatively impacts their employment opportunities and income: 'The Uyghurs are likely to be just as educated as the Hans, but they spend most of their time being educated in their own language' (p. 354).

Parents want their children to learn about and appreciate their own culture but they also want them to have the best opportunities in the future. Parents make strategic choices about which pathway to choose for their children, *putong* versus *minzu*. Children attending *minzu* schools can find that this limits their later educational and career choices, as *minzu* schools teach very little English; children attending *putong* schools may have difficulty learning in Mandarin and adjusting to different cultural practices and values. Families often weigh up the benefits and disadvantages of each system and those with more than one child (the one-child policy did not apply to minority groups) sometimes send one child to a minority school and one to a Han school. This way the family can maintain its cultural identity and heritage while also ensuring economic benefits and status for the family. Parents can feel torn, however, between wanting their children to understand and retain their cultural heritage and also wanting them to be successful in the context of a highly competitive education system where employers may not be interested in students only qualified in minority languages and cultures. Large numbers of Han people have migrated or been sent to minority areas which means that *minzu* major students have to compete with them for employment opportunities and *minzu* majors and subjects may not seem as useful to employers.

The dual education system can thus be a two-edged sword where policies designed to 'help' minority students can limit their broader social integration and later career opportunities (Ma 2009; Wang, Lu 2017) and they can suffer alienation no matter which track they take. Binaries of minority versus mainstream Han can also create artificial barriers among people as they define people through a single characteristic rather than other facets of their lives and there are growing debates within China about the usefulness of ethnic minority categories and their implications for individuals as well as the nation (Leibold & Chen 2014).

These tensions mean that *minzu* schools have become less attractive, with enrolments falling in recent years. Enrolments of Inner Mongolian students in *minzu* schools have dropped from 73.3 percent and 66.8 percent for primary and secondary schools in the 1980s, to 28 percent and 27 percent respectively in 2014 (Wang, Lu 2017). The number of minority students choosing a *minzu* major at minority universities rather than a *putong* major is also declining (Wang, Lu 2017).

The declining attractiveness of *minzu* education means these students are increasingly competing for places in mainstream schools or universities for which they are less academically prepared than their Han competitors and they do not benefit there from the subsidies available in *minzu* education.

No matter what choice they make, minority students at mainstream schools and universities sometimes report discrimination as they are seen as being 'backward' or of a 'lower class', especially when they are minority-language speaking (Banks 2014, Wang, Lu 2017). Many have learnt Mandarin at the expense of their own language (Yang & Nima 2015; Zang 2015) and also may feel 'dislocated' from their homelands and cultures (Wang & Zhou 2003). In the *neidi* schools, only one subject is taught in the minority language at junior secondary school and usually none at senior secondary level, with more attention given to other subjects (Yang 2017). Ethnic minority students report feelings of mixed or confused identity, wanting to learn about and retain their cultural heritage but worried about discrimination or later disadvantage. Ethnic identity is fluid and subject to the internal factors described above but also to global imperatives so minority students also face the need to consider futures and workplaces beyond the national sphere.

Advances since the 1950s have created greater autonomy and access for minority education, but tensions between segregation versus cultural preservation cause several problems, especially for students studying far from their homelands. Despite decades of special policies, minority enrolments during the expansion of higher education have not increased at the same rate as for other students, and inequalities between ethnic minority groups and the majority Han population are growing, regardless of whether they live in Han or minority regions (Zang 2015). Minority students suffer greater disadvantage, generally achieve lower levels of education and are also less likely to attend the more 'elite' universities. However, higher education in the border regions may benefit from the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) with the development of education links and exchanges and economic investment in neighbouring countries, which often share cross-border ethnic populations with these regions.

Despite the advances, it is evident that minority education policy and practice is fraught with tensions. Since many preferential policies are 'based on ethnicity rather than on individual characteristics, those who have benefited from the policies are not necessarily from a lower social background' (Yang 2017, p. 328), and resentment of perceived preferential treatment has led to further discrimination and prejudice by the Han majority and intensified conflict between the two groups (Law 2017). Such tensions resonate with the situations regarding ethnic minority groups in other countries such as the Māori in New Zealand and indigenous peoples in Australia and illustrate the difficulties of managing the balance between cultural preservation while also ensuring mainstream opportunities for ethnic minorities. The introduction of ethnic solidarity education (ESE) for the whole school population has as its stated aims to reduce ethnic tensions and foster ethnic tolerance and social cohesion (see Chapter 5) but deeper tensions remain. These relate to the assimilationist nature of China's minority policy which is seen as providing not just a 'legitimized space' for the preservation and development of ethnic cultural heritage but as a 'civilizing project' (Yang 2017, p. 330) reflecting more colonialist intentions. The introduction of *putonghua* as the official language of instruction across the nation, even in Han areas with local languages, has resulted in commentators such as Vickers and Zeng (2017) viewing this as 'linguistic imperialism' (p. 143). They argue that although the strategy behind this policy since 1949 has been one of nation building and the easing of ethnic tensions in the far west, this has not been successful, and the party-state's response has instead been 'ramping up patriotic education, intensifying policies of sinification and further restricting religious expression' (p. 143).

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Probably the most disadvantaged group of all in China is that of students with disabilities and learning difficulties. Although improvements in the provision of education to children with disabilities have begun in very recent years, due to previous neglect and stigma attached to disability, there is a severe shortage of specialist schools and qualified staff, particularly in rural areas, as well as resources and qualified staff for students with disabilities in mainstream schools.

Special needs education in China is in its infancy with only an estimated 72 percent of students with special needs enrolled in school (Marketing to China 2018). A report for the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2011 (Zheng et al. 2011) estimated that there were 85 million people in China with a disability, although China has a much narrower definition of disability than other countries so this figure may be 'the tip of the iceberg'. Definitions of disability include visual, hearing, speech, intellectual, physical, psychiatric (autism is included in this category) and multiple disabilities but not others such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (Kritzer 2011). The WHO report (Zheng et al. 2011) found that the number of people with disabilities is increasing due to workplace accidents and environmental factors such as pollution, with physical and mental disabilities increasing markedly over the past two decades, while visual, hearing, speech and intellectual disabilities decreased significantly.

In 2015, China had 2,080 specialist schools employing 50,334 teachers and enrolments of 491,740 (China Statistical Yearbook 2016b). The 1986 Compulsory Education Law made basic education compulsory for all children and the 1995 Education Law stipulated that people with disabilities should be offered opportunities in education. China endorsed the International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities and other international statements on this issue, and in the 1980s adopted policies that promote inclusive learning in regular classrooms via the Learning in Regular Classrooms (LRC) programme.

Students with moderate or severe disabilities are generally educated in specialist schools but the number of children with disabilities learning in regular classrooms has increased under the LRC programme although provision varies across different provinces and districts. Qu and Cowan (2016) claim that the percentage of children with disabilities in mainstream LRC classrooms has actually been decreasing since 2001 due to lack of clear and consistent policy guidance. Dauncey (2017) argues that historically, there has been greater emphasis on students with mild physical disabilities and sensory disabilities meaning that students with intellectual or behavioural disabilities 'are left somewhat out in the cold' and access to education depends not just on the type and severity of a student's disability but also their geographical location and 'the attitudes and support of those around them' (p. 310)

Although 55 percent of students with disabilities attend regular schools, Wang, Mu and Zhang (2017) contend that resources and support for teachers in these schools is 'shaky' (p. 116). In their survey of 2,549 primary and junior secondary teachers who work with students with diverse disabilities across 272 regular schools in Beijing and Harbin, only 21.4 percent had received in-service training. Most teachers developed their expertise 'on the job' and used their own 'agency' to develop their professional skills. Wang et al. (2017) concluded that teachers in regular classrooms experience challenges in accommodating children with disabilities due to not only a lack of professional development but also a paucity of support services and resources.

Yang and Yang (2015) found a similar picture for teachers in specialist schools. Their study of 3,485 full-time teachers (8.8 percent of the total) in specialist schools identified a number of difficulties they encounter. These teachers work in schools for children with hearing impairments, schools for children with visual impairments, schools for students with intellectual disabilities, and generalist specialist schools, in nine provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions. The most commonly stated difficulties were the diversity of students (55.9%), heavy workloads (34%), difficulties gaining promotion (33.5%) and lack of instructional support (30.2%).

As part of their Chinese Students' Resilience and Wellbeing survey of 2,600 Grade 4 to 9 students across multiple provinces, Mu, Hu and Wang (2017) randomly selected 112 children with disabilities and 112 without disabilities to examine their perceptions of support from teachers. The children with disabilities were 'plagued by multiple stressors across individual and social domains' (p. 129), reporting lower levels of wellbeing, higher risk of poverty, bullying and discrimination, and less support from teachers. As with the Wang, Mu and Zhang (2017) survey of teachers in regular classrooms with students with disabilities, Mu and his colleagues comment that individual teachers are not necessarily to blame, but that they work in an increasingly competitive, neoliberal environment that judges teachers (and their salaries) according to their students' results:

> [I]t may be unfair to put the full blame on teachers for providing insufficient support to these students. As neoliberalism increasingly deprofessionalizes teachers, it is understandable that teachers sometimes have to submit to the neoliberal logic. (p. 132)

Although previous laws were vague and provision of education to people with disabilities was patchy, of poor quality or non-existent, China is now moving fast to try to catch up with best practice elsewhere. In 2017, the *Regulation on Education for Persons with Disabilities* (State Council 2017a) was promulgated coming into force in May and was followed in July by the *National Policy on the Second Phase of Special Education 2017*.

The new regulations are far-reaching and ambitious, aiming to improve access, quality and provision of all levels of education. They make refusal of enrolment unlawful and require local governments to organize assessments, rehabilitation services, facilities, resources and support for education for children and adults with disabilities in both mainstream and specialist settings to 'gradually advance the establishment of barrier-free environments for all levels and all types of schools'. The regulations reiterate the right of children with disabilities to receive compulsory education in their local neighbourhood school (or nearby school if they need specialist support) and local upper secondary schools and prescribe further provision of vocational and higher education in either mainstream or specialist institutions. Schools will receive CNY6,000 (USD1,000) a year per student to upgrade facilities (such as toilets and stairs) and for specialist teachers (*China Daily* 2017k) and must offer 'more open and flexible' models of schooling including support for home- and self-study. The regulations also establish an expert national committee and special education resource centres to carry out assessments and provide guidance and training to schools, parents and guardians, and free tuition and support for children with disabilities educated at home. Specialist schools are required

to develop individualized learning plans and to listen to the views of students, parents and guardians. Government education departments at all levels must establish specialist departments and services and schools, colleges and universities are required to develop or improve special education training courses and to provide pre-service and in-service teacher training.

These eagerly awaited regulations were swiftly followed by the national policy indicating that education of students with disabilities has finally been placed firmly on the national education policy agenda. How quickly and effectively these policies and regulations are implemented across different areas remains to be seen, given different conditions across provinces and counties, but there is no doubt that they represent a major milestone in the rights of people with disabilities to education in China. Although the regulations and policy are ambitious, they are silent about precisely how curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices need to be customized to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, and significant staff development will be required for teachers at all levels.

Despite the new policy pronouncements, current provision is uneven, with examples of both good and bad practice as well as continued discrimination against students, especially those with mental health conditions or more severe forms of disability. The new regulations do not address systemic problems including compulsory physical examinations for students entering universities which still permit those with 'physiological defects' or 'mental disorders' to be rejected.

This sector has historically been neglected and under-funded and long characterized by stigma, with children with disabilities viewed as 'defective' and largely hidden from view. Medicalized models of disability persist rather than social models which view the 'handicap' not so much as residing within the person with the disability but in the ways that they are handicapped by systems and structures. Negative attitudes prevail in Chinese society towards people with disabilities and students with disabilities suffer much discrimination (China Disabled Persons' Federation 2016), so attitudinal change will take much longer to take effect.

PRIVATE EDUCATION

Luke (2016) argues that the persistent and emerging patterns of inequality in education arise from China's cultural, spatial, demographic and socioeconomic diversity and heterogeneity, and varying local practice. He argues that inequalities are less the result of market-driven neoliberalist principles than the tensions 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 practice' (p. 382), once again reflecting the policy-implementation gap. As Vickers and Zeng (2017) argue, this also allows the CCP to attribute any failures of policy to local levels rather than to central or systemic shortcomings.

But market-driven neoliberalism has undoubtedly resulted in the massive re-emergence of private schooling in China (after it was shut down in 1949) and it is increasingly playing a role in education provision especially for wealthier and socially aspirant families. Although it is a relatively new phenomenon it is expanding at an astonishing rate, with Wang and Chan (2015) describing it as a 'defining characteristic of China's current transitional society' from a State-run to a market economy (p. 89). The definition of 'private' or '*minban*' education is complex and can involve many 'hybrid' models. The term *minban* originally applied to community-run schools in rural areas for children with no access to education but has evolved to mean 'for profit'.

The number of private schools has risen spectacularly in the 2010s. In 2008, private preschool, primary, secondary, higher and vocational and technical education constituted 20 percent of all education and training institutes (Naftali 2016) and this figure has increased

significantly since. By the end of 2016, there were more than 171,000 private schools with nearly 50 million students, with over 8,000 new private schools opening in the previous year alone (*China Daily* 2017a).

There are thousands of privately run child care or early learning centres as well as after-school and weekend educational programmes. These informal educational centres are ubiquitous and can be seen across China especially in cities where parents can regularly be seen taking their children to these centres after school and on weekends.

The expansion of private education ventures is largely due to the growing wealth of many families who seek opportunities for 'elite' education for their sons and daughters, or those who feel that their children need to 'keep up' in the educational race, as well as the increase in the numbers of entrepreneurs seeking profit-making ventures. Education is often the largest single item of family expenditure.

However, private schools cater for poor rural or migrant children as well as the wealthier. Private schools and kindergartens in rural areas may have very basic facilities and difficulties in recruiting qualified staff, unlike private schools in more developed areas which can have impressive facilities and offer a range of extra-curricular activities, preschool education, and English tuition.

Private universities have been established across China and are growing in type and number. Private higher education was abolished after 1949, and existing private and religious institutions were converted to public ones, but they re-emerged from 1978 and grew rapidly due to insufficient capacity in the public sector and rising demand. They originally tended to be founded and financed by wealthy overseas Chinese, especially from Hong Kong. In 2005, 175 private universities had been approved to issue diplomas, enrolling 810,000 students. Many 'have expanded from small colleges renting makeshift campuses to large operations owning spacious campuses enrolling 10,000 to 40,000 students' (Lin 2007, p. 45). By 2012 there were

630 non-government higher education institutions and by 2015, 813 (China Statistical Yearbook 2016c), an increase of nearly 30 percent in three years. Private universities can enrol students with lower entrance scores but charge much higher tuition fees.

Government policies since the 1990s have encouraged and facilitated the establishment and growth of private education, including the conversion of public schools into private *minban* schools or publicly owned schools operated by the private sector. The intention is to encourage the adoption of market principles in education so that schools can generate profits and be less reliant on government funding (Wang & Chan 2015). In 2017 the State Council announced the complete lifting of restrictions on private investment in education and the entitlement of private schools to preferential tax policies and the same access to student loans, scholarships and state aid as public schools. However, the guidelines also state that the management and quality of private education needs to be improved and made clear the political expectations for private education: 'Private institutes should reinforce the leadership of the Communist Party of China, and they should cover socialist core values throughout their curriculum' (*China Daily* 2017a).

Private schooling comprises a complex, diverse and sometimes murky mix of different types of schools often involving a 'hybrid' of public and private, blurring the distinction between 'public' and 'private' education. Different types range from private schools 'affiliated' to (often prestigious) public schools, former public schools 'converted' into private schools, and community-run schools – all subject to varying degrees of government control – through to international schools operated either by private Chinese or foreign individuals or companies. Affiliated or 'sister' schools are often private–public partnerships that provide additional funding to public schools and profits for investors. They may receive public funding but their finances must be run separately from the public school. Converted schools are often an offshoot of a public school, funded by the public school and sometimes with shared facilities and resources, but with greater autonomy in management and teacher recruitment. Some receive local government subsidies if they admit public students and have good reputations and they can also hire publicly funded teachers from public schools; their affiliation with a public school gives them higher status and credibility.

Universities often have affiliated schools that are run on an entrepreneurial basis to attract more revenue, provide education for the children of university staff, add to the prestige of the university, or attract high-achieving students who can then be funnelled into the university. Many private schools are also located within wealthier gated communities which have sprung up following real estate booms and the locations of prestigious public and private schools can push up real estate prices markedly.

The level of autonomy enjoyed by private education providers depends on how they are owned, funded and controlled, with converted schools having the least autonomy and international schools the most. Private schools generally have more autonomy than public schools including local control over the curriculum and teaching, but they must comply with government regulations. According to Wang and Chan (2015) only schools that are entirely privately funded can avoid direct control of their operations and international schools are essentially exempt from government education regulations. This burgeoning industry has seen instances of mismanagement, and local governments have introduced new policies requiring private schools to establish financial reserves and stricter financial oversight amid continuing concerns about the quality, integrity and governance of many private education enterprises.

Some private schools have been set up by students returning from overseas, or by teachers or academics who want to establish more innovative and creative, or more Western-oriented, schools. Foreign providers usually have to find a Chinese joint-venture partner but the regulations around foreign educational collaborations have been easing in recent years.

Private education ranges from relatively modest local community-run schools, and even volunteer-run schools for migrant children in large cities, to 'elite' private schools. These 'elite' schools are often run by entrepreneurs who may have received degrees at prestigious overseas universities, or large corporations such as New Oriental. New Oriental is the largest private provider of education in China which in 2017 had 77 schools and 850 learning centres and is the world's third largest international education provider. Some individual entrepreneurs have also established hundreds of kindergartens and schools, often with names in their titles such as 'Oxford' or 'Cambridge' when in fact they have no connection to these. Staff at these schools often are required to engage in considerable marketing and promotional work and also publish research, even if it has nothing to do with their teaching but is merely intended to project a better image of the school. At many schools, the quality of teaching can be low and they may have few resources but parents are desperate to gain an advantage for their children and are unable to judge the quality of the teaching and the programmes.

The high-end companies provide a range of top-level resources and promise the chance to mix with other 'elites' and hence gain entry into the upper levels of Chinese and international society. They have become a status symbol for the ultra-wealthy, or in Bourdieusian terms, a source of 'symbolic capital'. Many produce glossy prospectuses with photos of foreign children in the classrooms. Many overseas schools, including British ones such as Harrow and Wellington College, have established sister schools in China, which offer a replication of the British school's curriculum as well as education in English. Students from these schools feature prominently in the applications to prestigious overseas universities such as Oxford and Cambridge and the American Ivy League universities.

There are other reasons why parents choose private education for their children apart from prestige. This phenomenon is also due to parents' dissatisfaction with the examination-oriented curriculum and perceived poor quality of the public system. For similar reasons, some parents take their children out of public school before they have finished compulsory education to home school their children even though it is illegal. These children are not eligible to sit for the *gaokao* so they are often sent abroad for higher education. A similar motivation underlies the revival and growth of '*sishu*' schools which focus on traditional Chinese culture, an example of the desire by some parents to return to traditional values. These schools are controversial due to practices such as students being required to read classical texts from thousands of years ago in their entirety rather than just the excerpts which are read by children in mainstream schools. A *sishu* was originally a private school established during the Qing Dynasty by wealthy families and there are now an estimated 2,000 *sishu* schools in China (Sixth Tone 2017). Modern *sishu* schools (*xiandai sishu* 现代私塾) have also become an instrument of spreading Chinese government influence abroad, with their establishment overseas in countries like the United Kingdom in a similar fashion to the Confucius Institutes at university level (see Chapter 6).

There has also been a burgeoning of private religious schools such as Muslim schools. Mosques have traditionally provided religious instruction for adults and children to cater for China's 25 million Muslims (from ten different minority groups) and are now permitted to run schools, except in Xinjiang due to a fear of separatism and strict controls over Muslim communities there (Jaschok & Chan 2009).

The expansion of private education and 'hybrid' public–private models illustrates the contradictions between national economic and political policies. The retreat from the regulation of private education contrasts with the government's political directives that private schools and universities must support the CCP and cover socialist core values in their curriculum. The lack of regulation of private education has led to concerns about opaque management systems and lack of transparency around financial affairs and allocation of resources (Liu 2018).

The 'hybrid' models have led to the blurring of boundaries between public and private education, the encouragement of entrepreneurship in public schools and increased competition between them. Hyper-capitalism and desperation not to be left behind in the race for educational success has meant that these neoliberal ventures have created opportunities for parents and students but inevitably to higher costs and greater uncertainty in the choices that they make.

INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS AND PROGRAMMES

Enrolment in international schools by Chinese nationals is probably the most notable trend in the quest by Chinese parents for education that carries social cachet and it is increasingly becoming the education of choice among middle-class and affluent families (Liu 2017). Originally established for the children of expatriates living and working overseas, in China international schools increasingly cater for affluent national parents seeking a competitive edge for their children to improve their child's future prospects as well as their own status; they function as a passport to study in prestigious universities overseas and as a vehicle for joining the 'international elite'. International schools offer curriculum and qualifications from countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, Canada and Australia. They offer a curriculum in English (or sometimes German), the chance to mix with foreign or other 'elite' children, and opportunities for direct admission to foreign universities as students can study British A-levels or the International Baccalaureate. These schools also prepare students for foreign accreditation programmes such as the American APT or SATs, or Cambridge Examinations.

Considerable kudos is attached to the success of students at these schools in gaining entry to prestigious universities internationally, and each year their campuses are festooned with posters displaying photographs and stories of their most successful students and lists of the foreign (usually American Ivy League) colleges to which they have been accepted. Statistics are prominent on their websites and prospectuses showing students' results in foreign final-year school examinations. Many public high schools, while not private, also aspire to be considered 'elite' schools, and engage in similar practices.

Since legislation in 2003 permitted the establishment of Sino-foreign cooperative educational ventures, hundreds of joint school, college and university programmes and campuses have been established. The University of Nottingham in Ningbo was the first joint university venture in 2005 and others now include New York University in Shanghai, Xi'an Jiaotong-Liverpool University and Duke Kunshan University, and the number of such campuses or joint ventures is growing.

CONCLUSIONS

Despite much government effort and rhetoric to reduce inequalities in education, equal educational opportunities remain a chimera for many as conflicting policies and ideologies mean that, according to Li and Yang (2013), the education system is being transformed into 'a triumph of middle-class ideology' (p. 322).

Education can act as both an enabler as well as a disabler, either transforming opportunities (especially for the disadvantaged) or reproducing privilege. As in ancient times, education in China continues to function as the primary determinant of individuals' life chances and career opportunities and therefore ensuing wealth or poverty. Although more educational choices are available than ever before, how much 'choice' can be exercised depends on factors such as socioeconomic status, class, geographical location, ethnicity, gender, disability and personal connections.

The upshot of these trends is that the ancient belief in education that anything can be achieved through hard work (though never entirely true) is being replaced by the reality that anything can be achieved through power and money. Contradictory government economic, educational and social policies and social forces are undermining attempts to reduce inequalities, leading to increased social stratification and educational disparities which can seriously imperil the life chances of many. The persistent gaps between rich and poor and urban and rural areas have implications not just for individuals but for the integrity, good governance and stability of the nation.

5

Ideologies in Competition

Competing ideologies can be found in China in political, economic and social policies and at all levels within the education system. Educational discourse and policy contain a complex mix of often contradictory 'traditional' Confucian, market-driven neoliberal, and utilitarian ideologies of education all interwoven with the political needs of the party-state with its rhetoric of socialism 'with Chinese characteristics'.

Education in China is more overtly political than in most other countries, which has significant ramifications across the curriculum. Governments of most countries seek to impose their ideological and political views and aspirations onto their education systems through various policies and funding mechanisms but in China this is done in a much more explicit and direct manner and state interventions permeate all aspects of public (and often private) education.

Education is at the core of the government's human capital development strategy to develop the workforce it needs to drive its current and future national and international economic ambitions. But education also acts as the handmaiden of the CCP party-state to ensure a 'harmonious' society by enlisting the hearts and minds of citizens to the national cause through political, moral and patriotic education from kindergarten through to higher education. Education performs political and social functions at every level from national to local and serves the will and aspirations of the Party 'in sustaining and reinforcing its political leadership and domination' (Law 2017, p. 258). For families and individuals, it serves as a way of attaining social status, economic