

## **Edward Vickers and Zeng Xiaodong: Education and Society in Post-Mao China**

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### **Review by Mariana Münning**

The study of Chinese education is a vast field and both authors have been prolific contributors to said area of study, Edward Vickers in English and Zeng Xiaodong in Chinese. They have done an immense job in receiving and discussing the existing great amount of scholarship on Chinese education in both English and Chinese (it is a pity that there are no Chinese characters in the book) to provide a comprehensive view. The reader additionally profits from the extensive bibliography and the index. Their book represents the first western language all-encompassing work on the time period since Mao Zedong's death in 1976 and extending into the 21st century. Much of the hitherto existing scholarship was limited to the 20th century (Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in Twentieth-Century China*, 1996, and Thøgersen, *Secondary Education in China after Mao*, 1991). Vickers and Zeng have described the Chinese education system from all the possible crucial angles and contextualized it with political, social, economic, and historical developments and events. They show that the education system is interdependent with and representative for virtually all aspects of Chinese society. Therefore, it has a remarkable explanatory power for larger political and historical processes. The volume "focuses mainly on the formal education system as conventionally understood" (p. 2), omitting or touching only briefly on, however, adult and minority education and informal or grassroots education approaches.

Vickers and Zeng begin with a thorough review of the existing scholarship and divide it into four approaches. The first is the "official or orthodox perspective", which aims at the catching up with the West and surpassing it thanks to the guidance of the Chinese Communist Party. The second perspective is the "anti-globalist perspective", which focuses on blaming the West for any respective problems. The third is the rather economic "practice-oriented perspective", collecting empirical data, viewing students as "human capital" that need to be improved. The fourth, where the authors locate themselves, is the "critical perspective". It strives to unveil underlying mechanisms, discourses, and interests, showing how education caters to political socialization (p. 7) and questions the aims of education. Previous research into this direction has been undertaken by Pepper (1996) and Kipnis (*Governing Educational Desire*, 2011). Assessing the success of the education system depends on what one thinks education is for, and it may look different from the different four perspectives. In the case of China, the authors conclude, education is highly instrumentalist. As China's education system is often praised in other countries, a myth that the authors wish to debunk, as it

reveals the “Western” view of China as exotic and remote, the answer to the question of what the educational system is for should disenchant its admirers: The authors come to the conclusion that Chinese education is deliberately stratified to secure the rule of the party over a fragmented populace.

Before chapters 4 to 13 describe the various segments and aspects of the Chinese education system, beginning from early childhood education, chapter 2 offers a comparison to Asian neighbor states, while chapter 3 an overview of the “politics of education in post-Mao China”. These two chapters describe and explain historically the lack of equity as a striking difference between China and other East Asian countries. Japan and other East Asian countries were able to institute a universal education system with rather equal opportunities for all students, paired with economic success. China, in contrast, still has one of the most unequal education systems but is nonetheless tremendously economically successful. While in Japan, economic development eventually led to a higher degree of equality amongst the entire population, the PRC sees a constant decrease of equality with the growth of per capita income. In that regard, the authors add to the already existing evidence that the Kuznets curve, which depicts the hypothesis that inequality first increases but ultimately decreases with an increase of per capita income, has limited explanatory power (p. 15).

Why do development and equality not come hand in hand in China? In the section “The Maoist Legacy” of chapter 2 and in chapter 3 the authors sketch out the historical development of education and investigate how Chinese decision makers tried to negotiate equality and developmental success in the formal education system. These two aims, i.e., the highest possible equality of all Chinese citizens in their educational opportunities or a focus on elite schooling of the few who would then be able to attain a much higher level of education and enable the PRC to compete internationally in the realms of science and economy, seem to be in conflict with one another. China has seen alternating phases of disseminating general basic education and of raising the educational level of elite schools such as key point schools, especially in urban areas.

This conflict between basic vs elite education represents the “red vs expert” conflict within the Communist Party, as the authors demonstrate. Mao and other radical leftists strove for a fully egalitarian education, which led to a “backlash” (p. 27) after his death, as intellectuals associated “egalitarianism with Maoist terror” (p. 28). Under Deng Xiaoping, an elitist approach was reintroduced, which was in fact reminiscent of Japanese Meiji reforms and late Qing and Republican times. In chapter 3 (esp. p. 35 ff), in which Vickers and Zeng explain the education politics of the post-Mao era in more detail, they describe nevertheless that there was still a continuing to and fro between egalitarianism and elitism. The dominant elitism, however, resulted in an aggravation of the urban/rural divide with many educational opportunities for city dwellers and only access to the most basic education in the countryside. This inequality is by no means accidental,

unavoidable, or temporary. Vickers and Zeng argue convincingly that many government acts, such as the *hukou* system (according to which citizens can only attend a school in the city they are registered, aimed at preventing countryside-city migration) and the *gaokao* college entrance examination cement inequality in order to secure the workforce in agriculture and other low prestige, but nonetheless crucial, jobs. A culture of excessive examination transports an illusion of meritocracy to legitimize the regime; a mere illusion in a society where education can be purchased with money, which is similar to the imperial examination system of the past (p. 177, 197). Chapter 9 thematizes the marketization of the school system and the increasing demand for supplementary and private education.

In so far, the authors conclude, Chinese education of the post Mao period is not only elitist, but also instrumentalist, with a solid pinch of nationalism. It aims at dividing the people not only economically and geographically to pursue different careers, but also politically and socially to disable them from uniting in protest against the government. The contents and skills taught in schools serve economic success and prosperity. This is a lesson learned from the collapse of the USSR, where material wealth was not in reach (p. 339). The Chinese Communist party draws enormous legitimacy from having been able to lift a huge part of the population out of poverty. Furthermore, the greatest beneficiary of China's economic rise and the post-Mao education reforms are the urban elites and middle class, which, to a large extent, overlap with the communist leadership. The South Korean and Taiwanese neighbors ultimately questioned a single party rule as a result of rising living and educational standards (p. 338). In the PRC, in contrast, the stratified education system caters to the acceptance of the ruling party. The ingredient of nationalism on top of it ensures that problems can be blamed on the outside world, especially a malevolent West.

As hopefully becomes clear from this summary, Vickers and Zeng tackle Chinese education from a systemic angle. The actual curriculum is discussed rather briefly in chapter 6, which adds the dimension of ideological content taught in the schools to the description of the ideology underlying the school.

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