



Education and Society in China

EQUITY ISSUES IN CHINESE HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY

A CASE STUDY OF THE ENROLMENT EXPANSION POLICY

Hongzhi Zhang



Equity Issues in Chinese Higher Education Policy

Investigating the highly influential enrolment expansion policy in Chinese higher education, this book outlines how educational equity issues were understood and addressed in the formulation and implementation of the policy, and its impacts on the socio-economic fabric of China in the past decades.

Drawing on Chinese policy documents and interviews with government and university representatives, Zhang examines the education system under the Mao era and the post-Mao era and outlines the different approaches to equity that have characterized education in China in the 20th and 21st centuries. Stephen Ball's "policy cycle" is used as a framework to analyse the various contexts (text, discourse, and social practice) in which policy is formed. Zhang argues that education policy was not simply driven by concerns of equity but also by economic interests and political discourse. Zhang further goes on to analyse how education policy was implemented by provincial governments and highlights the tension between central policy and on-the-ground implementation.

Bringing analysis of Chinese policy and research to a wider audience, this text will interest education policymakers and academics in the field of educational equity and higher education research.

Hongzhi Zhang is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. His main research interests are educational equity, education policy, higher education, Asia study, and curriculum and pedagogy. Hongzhi is a co-editor of *Asia as Method in Education Studies: A Defiant Research Imagination* (Routledge, 2015). He has established "Asia as method" as a researchable concept and contributed influential theoretical and empirical developments in research about "Asia as method" in educational studies, particularly how it can be developed in multicultural, post-colonial Asian countries and for it to be culturally expansive in Western education systems as an ideal and as a practice across cultures.

Education and Society in China

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A Case Study of the Enrolment
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Hongzhi Zhang

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To my daughters Chloe and Zoe



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Abbreviations

- ACWF All-China Women's Federation, <http://www.women.org.cn>
- CPCCC Communist Party of China Central Committee. The Communist Party of China Central Committee is elected by the party's National People's Congress. It implements the resolutions of the party's National People's Congress, leads the party's whole work, and externally represents the Communist Party of China. Its term is five years.
- GDP Gross Domestic Product
- HEIs Higher Education Institutions
- MoE Ministry of Education, <http://www.moe.edu.cn>
- NASW National Association of Social Work, <http://www.naswdc.org/>
- NBSC National Bureau of Statistics of China, <http://www.stats.gov.cn/>
- NPC National People's Congress. "The National People's Congress of the People's Republic of China is the highest organ of state power. Its permanent body is the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. The National People's Congress and its Standing Committee exercise the legislative power of the state" (CPCCC, The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1982, Arts. 57 and 58).
- OCED Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, <http://www.oecd.org/>
- SC State Council. "The State Council, that is, the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China, is the executive body of the highest organ of state power; it is the highest organ of state administration" (CPCCC, The Constitution of the People's Republic of China, 1982, Art. 85).



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1 Framing equity issues in Chinese higher education

1.1 Narrative story

In 1999, China's government developed a policy to expand the enrolment scale of higher education. However, as a high school graduate in 1999, I did not know of this policy before I entered the institution of higher education. Once there, I formed the impression that those who were admitted by higher education institutions, under the enrolment expansion policy, did not come from low-socioeconomic status (SES) households. According to the enrolment expansion policy, some of my peers gained opportunities to access higher education by paying an extra 10,000 Yuan per year plus the tuition fee and other general fees.¹ I had earned my access to higher education by studying hard, so, when I found out that people could *buy* higher education admission, my first reaction to this policy was that it was unfair. This left a big question mark in my mind. I really wanted to know how the enrolment expansion policy was produced and implemented.

In the last semester at university, like most graduating students, I faced the tough question of how to find a good job. The gap between the ideal and reality is always large. As the first batch of graduates since the implementation of the enrolment expansion policy, we faced a labour market that was more competitive than ever before. Considering my subject specialization and the reputation of my university, it seemed the only choice for me was to become a high school teacher. At that time, many students sought greater choice by obtaining a higher degree. Therefore, I decided to do a Master's Degree when I graduated. In 2003, I was invited to undertake a Master's Degree at a top National Key University of China. For the first time, I began to understand what it meant to perform academic research in higher education. Three years of Master's study changed my way of thinking: I learnt to think about education issues in an academic way. At that time, I commenced rethinking the issues etched in my mind – educational inequity and the enrolment expansion policy, particularly. However, my thinking was unsystematic and lacked theoretical support.

In 2006, after a rigorous selection process, I started a job as an editor and reporter for the *Journal of China's Higher Education*, which is under the administration of the Ministry of Education (MoE). My main task was to

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read the relevant (higher) education policy and identify some related research topics. Based on these topics, I invited suitable authors (senior education scholars or university presidents) to write academic papers, which were published in the journal. Two years' experience gave me a comprehensive understanding of Chinese higher education policy. Since then, I have developed a strong interest in the field of policy analysis. Being a staff member in a public institution of the MoE, I had gained an enviable position in other people's eyes. However, the more I knew about Chinese higher education policy, the more I was confused about some issues. I began to think through the relationship between educational inequity and education policy. I tried to find a way to interpret equity issues in the public education policy. By reviewing the relevant literature, I found that Chinese education policy studies, as a field of research, started in the 1990s and was deeply influenced by Western theories and methodologies. So, I decided to do my PhD degree overseas, rather than in China.

Although I was studying Chinese higher education policy in a Western country, I wanted to mainly focus on Chinese literature. In my view, PhD studies of Chinese higher education policy in Western countries sometimes overemphasized Western ideas and scholarship. Hence, I wanted my study to mainly focus on Chinese literature and Chinese ways of thinking, while acknowledging the fact that Western ideas had informed Chinese policymaking and educational policy research. I was aware that this would involve me having to translate many documents from Chinese into English. I was also aware that this would add considerably to the work involved in undertaking my PhD. However, because the issue means so much to me, the extra work seemed very worthwhile.

Another reason I focused on Chinese literature is that this study aims to provide an accessible analysis of equity issues in China's higher education for an English-speaking audience unfamiliar with the Chinese education system or equity issues in Chinese education. When I came to Australia to start my PhD study in the field of education, in 2008, I found that Western academic scholars (including those in Australia) have relatively little knowledge about Chinese education as a whole, let alone its system, policy, or equity issues.

As an international student conducting a PhD project in the West about a Chinese education issue, I wanted to undertake the sort of work that would do two main things. I wanted my work to enhance Chinese education research (in English and in Chinese) through the introduction and deployment of a conceptual framework from the West that has the potential to provide additional insights into Chinese higher education policy. But, importantly, I also wanted to analyse Chinese policy documents and use the research of Chinese education policy scholars who publish in Chinese and have not been translated into English. As mentioned, this required me to undertake a considerable amount of translation.² But a major benefit, as I saw it, was that this would give English speakers, who cannot speak Chinese, access to certain Chinese

materials that they would otherwise not have access to. Admittedly, this access is filtered through my selections and interpretations. But I believed, and continue to believe, that such access will help to enrich Western scholars' knowledge about Chinese education and higher education policy with regard to educational equity in particular.

When I read the relevant literature, I felt that certain things were missing in Chinese educational equity policy research. First, I thought that the theoretical foundation of Chinese education policy research was not as strong as it could be. Due to what I saw as a tendency to overemphasize Western theories and methodologies, Chinese scholars tended not to systematically study the historical development of Chinese education policy in its own right. Second, I noted that, in Mao's era, Chinese educational equity research had a systematic theoretical framework and a rich, associated set of practices for promoting educational equity. Although underutilized these days, this remains an important resource for Chinese scholars to construct theoretical discourse in educational equity policy studies. I knew that more recently, in the post-Mao era, there has been a revival of interest in Western notions of equity in Chinese educational equity policy studies, but I wondered about their efficacy for China. Third, I noted that education equity values have not been well defined in the relevant policy documents. Furthermore, it was clear to me that literature specifically analysing equity issues in Chinese education policy was relatively scarce.

1.2 Research aims and questions

This book required beginning the policy analysis from a new viewpoint, thinking about the historical construction of educational equity policy in China's contexts; the balance of different values, such as the east and west, and the tradition and modernity in the process of policymaking. In particular, to deal with the theoretical tensions of translating Western-derived theories into the Chinese higher education policy, this book investigates the highly influential enrolment expansion policy in Chinese higher education. This policy had a wider impact on the socio-economic fabric of China in the past decades. Nonetheless, the equity issues associated with the enrolment expansion policy have not attracted a great deal of scholarly research. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore how educational equity issues were understood and addressed in the formulation and implementation of the enrolment expansion policy. This book also aims to contribute to that field of educational research called educational equity policy research. This involves the analysis together of education policy research and educational equity research. Drawing primarily from Chinese materials, this book seeks particularly to contribute to Chinese research in this field. But it also aims to provide an accessible analysis of equity issues in higher education in China for an English-speaking audience that is not familiar with the Chinese education system or with equity issues in Chinese education.

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The research questions in this study are:

- What are the equity issues confronting the Chinese higher education policy?
- How has educational equity in higher education been understood historically, in the context of broader approaches to educational equity?
- Through the example of a specific higher education policy, namely the enrolment expansion policy, how have educational equity issues been understood and addressed and with what effects?
- How can these be interpreted from a policy sociology perspective?

1.3 Conceptual framework

In many Asian educational contexts and much research on these contexts, Western-derived theories are commonly applied in an unproblematic manner, with insufficient attention given to where such theories originate and how they might be interpreted in Asian educational contexts. Conversely, nations that have chosen to reject Western-derived knowledge and mobilize somewhat restricted notions of local knowledge and wisdom have found themselves vulnerable to being impacted by global education trends beyond their control or involvement. What has become apparent to us is that no concepts or ways of thinking are as straightforward as they might first appear.

Descriptors such as “west”, “east”, and “Asian” must be viewed with special caution, owing to the nuances that they obscure. Even so, they are necessary to use because, as Singh (2009) suggests, regarding international students solely through a Western lens has inhibited the process of internationalization. To address this imbalance, the conceptual framework of this book has been consciously shaped by the approach taken by Chen (2010) who argues for critical studies of Asia using “Asia as method” to rethink the process of knowledge production in socio-cultural research. Chen’s book, “Asia as method: Towards Deimperialisation” was released at a time coinciding with the increased prominence of Asia on the world stage. His provocative ideas have inspired scholars researching Asia to look within Asia for their frame of reference and interact with the rest of the world about Asian knowledge and values. Taken together, these developments could also offer hope for Asia’s status to evolve from being merely a recipient and user of Western knowledge to one that is also an active contributor to global knowledge.

Chen (2010) insists that studies of Asia move beyond their paralyzing Western focus as either a positive or a negative referent and that they build their own standpoints, reference points, and research agendas.

The implication of ‘Asia as method’ is that using Asia as an imaginary anchoring point can allow societies in Asia to become one another’s reference points, so that the understanding of the self can be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt. On this basis, the diverse historical experiences

and rich social practices of Asia may be mobilised to provide alternative horizons and perspectives. This method of engagement, I believe, has the potential to advance a different understanding of world history.

(2010, p. xv)

To Chen (2010), the practice of using Western methods to analyse Asia data is akin to using the wrong lens to interpret and explain Asian phenomena, and they provide a wrong frame of reference for Asian countries. Based on his concepts of “Asia as method”, Chen (2010) calls for the generation of knowledge and values that are specific to the Asian regions. He proposes:

[using] Asia as the ‘method’ or an imaginary anchoring point and that societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so that the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt.

(p. 212)

He urges Asian scholars to ground themselves in the cultures of their own countries and reference other Asian countries with similar histories and contexts when engaging in research, causing a shift in frame of reference. To do this, he put forward two strategies – self-reflexivity and inter-Asia referencing. According to Chen (2010), self-reflexivity relates to interventions in local spaces, taking into consideration historical narratives, experience of colonization, imperialization, and Cold War in the local context, while inter-referencing operates at the regional level, whereby societies in Asia become each other’s points of reference.

To assist us to rethink and reinvestigate traditional cultures in the dialectical dialogue with the West, Chen further provides the notion of “translation” that “gives us a way to conduct reinvestigations that allow the organic shape and characteristics of local society and modernity to surface” (2010, p. 244). How does translation play its role in the dialectical dialogue between exotic cultures and local traditions? Chen explains that:

The object to be translated has to be subjected to existing social forces and must negotiate with dense local histories if it is to take root in foreign soil. What comes out of this long process of negotiation is not what was imagined at the initial moment of translation at all, but a localized product of this blending process.

(2010, p. 244)

We can see, therefore, that the object of translation has to be subjected to both the “local” and the “foreign”, and the process of translation usually involves dialogue and negotiation between exotic cultures and local traditions/wisdom. How, then, does translation actually happen? Chen (2010) posits that translation is a progression of both “negotiations” and “blending” between the “local” and the “foreign”, rather than a simple act of one toppling the

other. It occurs through two-way, simultaneous processes. Translation as a guiding concept brings to the fore the manner in which an existing regionally based local society is articulated to, and often over-determined by, the forces of modernity. Or, to put it another way, it invites us to explore the ways in which aspects of modernity are articulated to what was/is already there – all the while keeping in mind that “negotiation” has not occurred on equal terms.

“Asia as method” offers a new imagination of study that extends beyond a constant reference to the West towards alternate viewpoints, with Asian history, politics, and culture as main points of reference (Zhang et al., 2015; Zhang & Chan, 2022). In many Asian educational contexts and much study on these contexts, so-called Western theories are frequently applied in an unproblematic manner, with much too little attention being paid to where these ideas originate and how they are interpreted in Asian educational contexts, with inadequate attention being paid to so-called non-Western educational thinking and practice. At the same time, the authors have also become aware that people in some of these contexts would reject Western knowledge unproblematically and mobilize somewhat restricted notions of local knowledge and wisdom. What has become apparent to us is that no concepts or ways of thinking are as straightforward or innocent as they might first appear. These meta-notions of “west”, “east”, and “Asian” must be viewed with special caution, owing to the nuances that they obscure.

This book responds to Chen’s invitation to move beyond Western obsession and instead undertake educational studies in China that recognize the complex links between history, geography, culture, and knowledge in and about education. In other words, it views Chinese education policy studies from the Chinese viewpoint – completely understanding the manner in which China’s education systems, policies, and activities have interpreted Western awareness differently in relation to their own unique changing societies, contexts, and policies. Employing “Asia as method” in this research suggests the value of starting where people are, not where theory or critique would like them to be. It also points to the fact that different institutional and personal situations offer different affordances for this sort of research and that these need to be taken into account.

This book proceeded to critically examine the available literature keeping a balance between the insights gained by Western scholars that helped us to explore our key research question with the need to reflect on the emerging findings of our analysis for insights drawn from critical Asian scholarship and from the unique perspective of our study being based in China.

Having formulated my research questions and having immersed myself in the Chinese higher education literature, I found that Western modes of policy analysis were quite influential and frequently referenced by Chinese scholars. There was no way of avoiding this. I also found that many such approaches to policy analysis were not really suitable for my foci. After much consideration and experimentation, I eventually turned to the work of the policy sociologist Stephen Ball. Ball’s conceptual frameworks were developed in relation to the

United Kingdom. My study applies his principles to equity issues in Chinese higher education policy, thereby offering an approach to utilize a Western theoretical framework in Chinese education policy research. It adapts certain of Ball's key concepts to the political, economic, and cultural context of China. It discusses how the "context of influence", the "context of policy text production", and the "context of practice" are implicated in Chinese education policy research.

There are three main reasons why I use Ball's theory to analyse a specific Chinese higher education policy, namely the enrolment expansion policy. First, this policy is very complicated. There were many factors and values involved in building the policy agenda, producing the policy text, and even interpreting the policy text during the process of implementation. I found Ball's work most generative because he provides a rich conceptual framework, which helps me to interpret these complexities in a comprehensive way. Second, although Ball's theory was formed in the context of the United Kingdom, it has been widely used in a range of different contexts. But, I have been unable to locate any analyses of Chinese higher education policy which use Ball. Nonetheless, his notion of policy cycle worked as well for China as for other countries. Third, as a policy analyst, he has a strong interest in questions of educational equity and the values that inform education policymaking on this topic. I hope to show that his ideas on policy sociology can contribute to Chinese higher education policy analysis. To provide a context, it is necessary for me to introduce China's education system.

1.4 China's education system: an introduction

China is a country with one of the longest histories in the world. It is a unified nation consisting of 56 different ethnic groups. The people of different ethnic groups have jointly created a splendid Chinese culture. The People's Republic of China was founded on October 1, 1949. It is a socialist state³ under the people's democratic dictatorship. The socialist system is the basic social system of China. With a population of about 1.44 billion people (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2020) and a Mainland size of about 9,600,000 km², China is located in the east of the Asian continent, on the Western shore of the Pacific Ocean. It is the third-largest country in the world after Russia and Canada. There are 34 provincial-level administrative regions in China, including 31 Provinces, Autonomous Regions, Municipalities, and Servicemen in Mainland China, two Special Administrative Regions (Hong Kong and Macao), and Taiwan (NBS, 2020). According to the level of economic development and geographical locations, the mainland area of China can be divided into three major economic regions: The eastern, middle, and western regions. Due to various geographical conditions and historical factors, economic and social development has been uneven between different regions (Figure 1.1).