
Private Education Emerges in Modern China:

A Comparative Case Study

PENG WANG

Private schools in China date back almost half a century before the People's Republic was founded. The resurgence of private schools in recent years has accompanied the enormous economic and social changes in China. Also, private education is a key to the success of modernisation and the realisation of the economic targets has been seen to lie in the development of quality education. The aim of this article is to research the development of private education in China. I hope to provide insights and information for those interested in educational development in China.

Introduction

After the reformation of private education in the 1980s, private education in the form of private schools such as kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, and other private vocational and technical schools became a growing market area. Because of the financial independence that has led to administrative flexibility, creativity in curricula and instruction, and academic autonomy, private institutions seem to offer a fresh burst of energy to the Chinese educational system. Moreover, with the superior quality of private institutions, the number of parents who choose private schools for their children has dramatically increased. In 1996, there were over 20,700 private kindergartens, 3,159 private primary and secondary schools, and 672 private vocational and technical schools (Deng, 1997).

Because research comparing private and state schooling is very new, central policy discussions about improving schools is conducted at present without the benefit of up-to-date information. It is generally thought that the private sector is “different from the state sector” and that it is organisationally different throughout. Many believe that all private schools are similar, that they all differ from state schools, and that they all exhibit the organisational characteristics that are associated with effective schools.

The phenomenon of private schools is controversial and has caught the attention of Chinese society. Although private schools promote the provision of better and more efficient education, there are some critics of this idea. For example, because of their high fees, private schools were accused of serving only the wealthy and educating them separately from the remainder of society. Moreover, there are many problems involved with a continuing debate about private education imbalance, and the tension between profit making and quality education.

Furthermore, from the government's point of view, the development of private schools

makes it hard for the government to control teaching and learning in these schools, so that governmental regulations for and control of private colleges and universities are much stricter than for public educational institutions. Hence, many private schools have failed. It is not clear from the available records how many schools have been closed.

With these problems, it is important to understand the basic private school system in order to develop private schools in China. Therefore, it is important to discuss both the advantages and disadvantages of private schools, as well as to reveal the differences between state and private schools, to the public.

Defining Private Schools in China

The terms “public schools”, “private schools”, and “non-governmental schools”, as they are used for China’s schools, are not easy to clarify. There is some confusion, probably because of the rapid development of non-public schools and the incomplete legislation for such schools in recent years. Generally speaking, the government funds public schools. “Non-governmental schools” seems to refer to all those schools that are not founded by the government, including private schools and those founded by the local communities or social organizations. Private schools are founded and run by private organizations or individuals. They charge fees for student education. Private schools can recruit students, hire teachers and staff, and design the curriculum autonomously.

Private schools may include kindergartens, primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational schools, institutions of higher education, and schools offering short courses or institutions offering community education (*China Education Daily*, 1 November, 1996).

Reformation of the Education System in China

The central government of China in 1978 proposed that the national economic and social strategies should serve the development of four socialist modernisations: industry, agriculture, national defence, and science and technology. The key to the success of modernisation and realizing the economic targets was seen to lie in the development of quality education. At that time, however, the stock of manpower for economic restructuring to achieve the national economic targets fell much short of what was needed.

Obviously, the great demand for qualified manpower supply could not be met through the application of different Maoist educational policies of politicisation and revolution, nor through adhering to the post-Maoist educational policies of centralized planning. Moreover, many other problems besieged the state educational system and schools. In other words, the state schools were divorced from the rapid economic development. They could not meet the needs of the people, particularly the needs of the middle class and market demands.

Therefore, many factors, both internal and external to the education system, contributed to the education reforms in the middle 1980s, which culminated in 1985 in such central government directives as “The Decision of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of China’s Education Structure”. In 1986, the National People’s Congress turned this directive into the Education Act. In this fact, a series of educational reforms were promulgated. These educational policy reforms sent out messages encouraging the setting up of private schools

with constitutional approval. The Decision and the Act made it explicitly clear that “local governments must encourage and direct state-run enterprises, social organizations and individuals to establish schools”.

In the 1980s, according to market economic policy, many state sectors in China were reformed and privatised and the education sector was one of these. Since then, there has been more opportunity for the state to invest in private schools. The Guangya Elementary School, which is located in Southwest China’s Sichuan province, was the first private school in 1992. The success of this school motivated others to invest in this new market. In 1996, over 6,000 private schools had emerged, constituting less than 4 per cent of the country’s total schools, with total enrolment of about 6.8 million students (*CND*, 1996). This is now a promising market. And the number of parents who recognise the superior quality of private institutions and choose a private school for their children has dramatically increased. As a result, private education at different levels has been booming in China.

In the following I will examine the resurgence and development of private education in China, and explore the roles private schools play in the educational system. That parents are choosing non-state schools, in particular private schools, reflects the state’s pursuit of educational quality, and also reflects the exacerbation of social inequality.

The Role of Private Schools in China

A market metaphor

It is asserted that the rise of private schools is the result of the reform of the economic system, especially the development of the market economy that motivates social organizations and individuals to establish schools (Zhu, K., 1994). As the market economy is the driving force for the movement of private schools, it seems helpful to use a market model to analyse the phenomenon of private schools in China. Actually, some people, in particular the advocates of private schools, have already looked at education from a market perspective, whether explicitly or implicitly. Some see education as an industry. Some view education as a commodity or “consumption” service—spending money to buy it (Wu, 1994). So, in such a “market of education”, education can be seen as a commodity or service. Schools are providers of the service. Parents are consumers who buy the service.

More choices and higher quality of education for parents

It is argued that the growth of societal demand for education results in the outdated “supply system” of public education, which is incapable of providing and satisfying parental choices, the job requirements of young students and the corporation’s need for talent (Wu, 1994). Promoters of private schools contend that the private schools provide parents with more choices with a high quality of education, which is not available from public schools. For example, some wealthy parents are not satisfied with the public schools and want to give their children a better education. The emergence of private schools can meet these parents’ needs (Hou, 1994; Qu, 1993; Xi, 1994; Zhang, 1994). As mentioned earlier, the academic programs in many private schools are geared to parents’ wishes, such as the enhanced English and computer courses. The educational quality of private schools is expected by the public to be good as a result of the drive for survival. It is argued that facing pressures from parents and

society, private schools have to make quality of education their priority and search for means to improve their teaching and learning (Lin, 1996). A survey of 500 parents in Beijing suggests that 50 per cent of parents thought private schools supplement the insufficiency of public schools. They provide students and parents with more choices, and give high-quality education with unique academic programs (Zhang, 1994).

Saving the state educational appropriations

Advocates argue that the private schools are sharing the state's task of basic education and can alleviate the shortage of governmental educational funds (Qu, 1993; Zhang, 1994a; Zhang, 1994). Zhu Kaixuan, director of the State Education Commission (SEC), admitted the non-governmental schools are to some extent relieving the government of part of its burden in educational funding and social employment (Zhu, K., 1994).

Promoting reform of the school system

Advocates of private schools see the resurgence of private schools as the beginning of a profound reform of the educational system. They claim that although the correct number of private schools is small compared with the giant public school system (the specific statistics are not available), the significance lies in that it challenges the decades-long sole government control over education and the beginning of a new citizens' educational system (Wu, 1994). It is argued that the growth of private schools has broken down the monolithic pattern of public education, giving the school system a pluralistic structure, which can meet the different needs of the society and comply with the market economic system (Wu, 1994; Zhang, 1994a; Zhang, 1994). Some contend that private schooling has provided the opportunity for change, and in fact marks a change in the rigid school system of the past based on economic planning and administrative orders. Some assert that the many different forms of non-governmental schools have already emerged: privately run schools with public assistance, government-run schools with assistance from the private sector, schools established by individuals, parties, social organizations, communities, or cooperatively with foreign ventures, and so on (Zhang, 1994). It is worth noting that the advocates promote a new educational system as "pluralistic" and with reference to the economic market. Some also argue that the rise of private schools provides competition and applies pressure to public schools, motivating them to improve educational quality and efficiency (Qu, 1993; Zhang, 1994).

Experimenting with educational alternatives

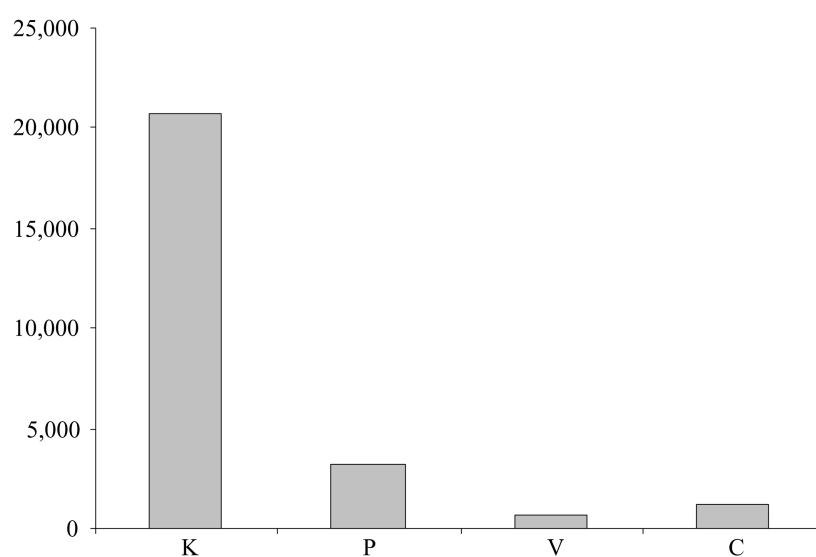
It is reported that many founders and principals in private schools want to experiment with new educational philosophies that would be impossible in the public school system. Thus, private schools provide a base for experiments and research into educational alternatives (Lin, 1996). It is also claimed that some of the operational modes of private schools have provided practical experience and models for the reform of existing public schools. Meeting the needs of the society and market has become the common ground of private schools. It is argued that by charging fees for education, private schools have established a barometer for compensated education by measuring what society can accept both financially and philosophically. Meanwhile, private schools can set up a board of directors and a school affairs committee system, having a high degree of autonomy of management in personnel and finance, and a

flexible wage system. The reform of public schools may well follow these lines (Wu, 1994).

The Expansion of Private Education

The first openly-labelled “private” school was the “Private Guangya School” in southwest China’s Sichuan Province. It was established and opened in June 1992 by a successful and farsighted entrepreneur Qing Guangya. He shocked the public by building a picturesque campus and implementing a revolutionary teaching philosophy, and openly using his name as the school name and admitting the “elite” nature of his school (Deng, 1997).

In the 1990s, private schools have mushroomed; over 6,000 private schools have emerged, constituting less than 4 per cent of the country’s total schools, with the total enrolment of about 6.8 million students (CND, 1996). According to some sources, during the 1996–97 academic year the total enrolment in standard private elementary and secondary schools reached 848,000, accounting for 0.4 per cent of the total elementary and secondary enrolment of 194,322 millions in the country (Wang, 1997). By 1995, private and non-governmental higher educational institutions reached over 800, and there are currently over 1,000 private colleges and universities (Zhang, 1996).



Number of Private Schools in China in 1996

Source: Deng, 1997

Note: K—Kindergarten

P—Primary and secondary

V—Vocational and technical

C—Private College

By the end of 1995, there were 20,780 private kindergartens, 3,159 private primary and secondary schools, and 672 private vocational and technical schools. In addition, there were 1,230 private colleges with an average enrolment of 2,400 students. Furthermore, “25 private colleges were authorized in 1996 to issue diplomas to their graduates, which not only indicated the qualitative growth of private colleges but also suggested a great leap in the government’s attitude toward private education as a whole” (Deng, 1997).

Generally, there are three types of private schools in terms of their ownership, financing and management. The first type is funded and owned by private investors. Some of them are former educational professionals, but most are successful businessmen. For them, running schools is like running a business. The second type is run by Chinese business firms or individuals in collaboration with overseas investors. Schools which are joint ventures between Chinese and overseas partners, are also orientated toward profit. The third type is owned and administered by Chinese enterprises or non-governmental departments, institutions or communities.

Many private schools have retired governmental officials or even current governmental officials on their boards, administration or advisory committees. It is common for the name of respected old revolutionaries, retired generals, ministers or congressmen to appear in private schools' brochures and advertisements. "Having such connections with the policy decision making departments, the private schools may sometimes circumvent the strict governmental regulations and control, and enjoy favourable treatment, for instance, in land procurement and tax exemptions" (Deng, 1997).

Legislation and Regulations

According to legislation and regulation in the development of private schools, it seems far from adequate or complete. The reason for the inadequacy of legislation for private schools is the government's ambiguous attitude to this issue. In rhetoric, the government seems very supportive of the development of private schools. In reality, however, there are only a few provisional regulations set up by the government, such as *Several Provisional Regulations Regarding Societal Forces Setting up Schools* and some other regulations regarding financial and teaching management of private schools (Zhu, K., 1994). The government may have commoners. On the one hand, private schools can provide education to the public without state funding. On the other hand, the development of private schools makes it hard for the government to control teaching and learning in these schools.

Private schools are subject to the authority of local educational authorities. With few exceptions, all private schools have to fulfil the core curriculum uniformly set for any basic school at all levels by the State Education Commission. Usually, the superintendent's office of the municipal or county education commission extends its authority to private elementary and secondary schools, and ensures their conformity to governmental regulations and requirements. The office is responsible for ensuring private schools are following the 9-year compulsory education system correctly, and seeing that schools are politically correct, and monitoring their educational revenues and expenditures. For private higher educational institutions, the provincial-level educational authorities are responsible for evaluating the applications to open schools, supervising and examining the operation and management of private colleges and universities. The final approval to open or disband a private higher educational institution lies with the State Education Commission. Comparatively speaking, probably because of the ideological control and the quality consideration, the governmental regulations for and control of private colleges and universities are much stricter than for public educational institutions. Currently, there are over 1,000 private higher education institutions. Only twenty-five colleges and universities have obtained permits from the State

Education Commission to issue three-year graduation diplomas. None have been given the approval to issue bachelor's degrees or higher degrees even though some institutions have the capacity to do so (Zhang, 1997).

Advantages of Private Schooling

In comparison with the state sectors, the private education institutions have many advantages. Most founders and administrators in the private sector are more pragmatic and have an insight into both the market and education. In addition, the decent payroll and fringe benefits of private schools have drawn many talented and ambitious educational professionals. More importantly, the financial independence has led to administrative flexibility, creativity in curricula and instruction, and academic autonomy (Deng, 1994).

Owing to the teaching process, it is claimed that the managers and teachers at private schools were working under heavier pressure than their counterparts in state schools.

Classes of private schools are much smaller than state schools, so that each student can get more face-to-face guidance from teachers. Beijing's private schools unanimously emphasise computing skills, English skills, and creativity. Huijia demands that all its graduates master English, computing, piano, and swimming. Among the school's thirty-two graduates last year, foreign universities recruited fourteen.

Criticism of the Private Schools

Although private contributions to education are regarded as "positive" in the mass mobilization for educational expansion in the reform era, private schools are criticised in many aspects. One of the most notorious events that sparked criticism was the political incident in Tiananmen Square in 1989. The elderly state leader Deng Xiaoping personally ignited the new wave of economic reform, which signified the beginning of deepening economic and educational reform and ushered in an unprecedented explosion of private schools in the 1990s (Deng, 1997).

Moreover, the unbalanced economic development in different areas during the reform era resulted in uneven regional educational development. For economically developed areas in east and south coastal provinces, educational investment is sufficient. Private schools are mostly located in economically developed urban and rural areas. They are not available for children in economically underdeveloped areas in west China. The growing regional differences in education investment, in turn, have accelerated the differentiation in economic development (Tsang, M., 1994).

Additionally, the high fee rate of private schools is one of the indicators of a division in the strata of the society in some cultures. It is not unique to capitalism but an historical truism for the process of social stratification and it is, in fact, a dual process. Initially, differences between people, or more accurately social roles, are merely noted, and subsequently the evaluation that any society attaches to these differentiated roles in order that they can be hierarchically ordered into strata. The private school from its historical origins in western capitalist society is a product of the interpenetration of landed commercial and industrial interests and the manner in which they allegedly play a major role in keeping alive and indeed

legitimizing the ideology underpinning the stratification of society. It is claimed that private schools serve a small group of the wealthy, educating them separately from the remainder of society.

Yet, unlike public schools that produce manpower to meet the national political and economic needs, a great number of private institutions are profit-oriented and seek only to teach knowledge and skills to those who are ready to pay (Levin, 1987).

For many private school proprietors, the direct cost-benefit analysis is an important consideration. Without state subsidies to private schools, they wish to recover at least the investment and costs they put into private education. "Most limit their capital investment or seek quick returns from what they put in, and many rent rather than invest in school building to maximize returns. If they have to purchase buildings, they obtain capital from clients or donors" (Kwong, 1997). In order to reduce costs, many private schools offering regular academic programs focus on social sciences or courses that do not require expensive instructional equipment such as laboratories or computers. If such equipment is available, students are charged extra fees. In many private schools, teaching and support staff are limited, so that the cost of salaries is reduced. In past years, the media on many occasions has exposed some proprietors of private schools who control costs even to the detriment of the health and academic achievement of students.

There is also imbalance and tension between the autonomy of private schools and state regulations which are seen as a means of control. State educational policy decision makers wish to keep private education on the right track of healthy development within the national educational system, and therefore enact various regulations and rules. Local educationalists and private educational professionals wish to have freer policies and have autonomy in their schools. They have to work hard and respond strategically and tactically to the seemingly stringent regulations and control. In the fully developed market economy of south China, imbalance and tension are stronger. And the private challenges to the public dominance are obviously felt in south China's Pearl River Delta (Mok, 1997).

Problems of the Private School System in China

The major assumptions for private education are among others, the model of supply and demand and economic efficiency. The emergence of private schools is the logical development of major changes within the society; the changes that have emerged from the growing acceptance and application of the law of supply and demand since the 1980s in the free market economy. When compared with public schools, private schools are more geared to meet the needs of students and parents, and to provide quality education to students in terms of academic achievement and holistic human development. Private schools usually provide students with quality education through advanced school facilities, experienced educational professionals, diverse and flexible curricula and educational technologies. Parents assume that their children by attending private schools will learn the skills that will enable them to succeed in the competition for a job.

Although the relative numbers of private schools and enrolments are still very small compared to those of the dominant public schools, the influence and significance of private education goes beyond what the numbers suggest. Since education had been an exclusive

domain of the state and the public for decades in modern China, the resurrection of private schools has enormous social and political implications.

However, the expected high quality of private education is still only an assumption. In this early state of private schooling, many people rush into the field without much expertise, and with only enthusiasm and a sense of adventure. There are complications and problems associated with private schooling. The major problems with many private schools, as many point out, is that their faculties are chiefly made up of elderly retired teachers who are less energetic and find it difficult to adapt to a new working style. According to a survey in Wenzhou city of the teaching staffs in ten private schools, 90 per cent of the 140 full-time teachers were retirees (Qu, 1993). However, when the administrators of private schools go to basic schools and teachers' colleges to recruit young teachers, they are required to pay high "training fees" (Zhan and Ji, 1994).

As a result of the lack of legislation for private schools, the management and regulation of private schools are often confusing because there are no laws or clear policies to follow. Private schools are not clear about their rights and obligations. For instance, some people have trouble acquiring land for founding schools. There are no clear policies dealing with taxation or loans for private schools. Some administrators of private schools are concerned that they could enjoy the same favourable policy regarding getting loans from banks as public schools do. Some even complain they are discriminated against by some government departments (Zhang and Ji, 1994). Private schools' relationships with the educational administration and with other schools are not clear, resulting in either unnecessary intervention or lack of support from the local government or educational agencies. There are problems with the internal management of private schools' internal management too. There are no laws or government policies regarding teachers' professional titles, welfare, pension, housing, and so on (Zhu, 1994; Zhang and Ji, 1994; Qu, 1993). Some dishonest people even used private schools as a means of swindling parents' money (Zhu, K, 1994; Qu, 1993).

The lack of legislation for private schools reveals a profound social problem in China: the inadequacy of legislation and laws. Without a set of clear laws and policies for private schools, who is to blame for the resulting problems? This raises questions about the role and responsibilities of the government. What should the government do about the development of private schools? One thing that seems to be an imperative for the central government is to speed up the legislation for private schooling. In doing so the central government needs to decentralize its legislative power and encourage provincial legislation. Decentralization of fiscal responsibility for education is not enough. Without decentralization of legislative power, any responsibility for the local governments may become a burden. Without autonomy, the local policy makers will still move in the old way: half a step forward, and one step looking back.

Conclusion

The philosophy of private schooling in China challenges the stereotypical view of public education, which is over-controlled by the government and ignores parents' needs. The emergence of private schools has connected "education" with "market", hitherto completely separate concepts to most Chinese.

People are beginning to view education from a different perspective. Private schools provide a forum for the public to debate the goals and methods of schooling. Private schools pose many important questions to the educational community, policy makers, and those concerned with education: What are the aims and goals of education? What are parents' educational choices? How can schools meet the needs of the parents and society? How can schools improve both educational quality and management efficiency? What is the appropriate role of the government in education? And so on. As advocates contend, private schools are experimenting with educational alternatives.

How do private schools affect public schools? From the limited available sources, it is not clear how private schools compete with public schools for teachers and students. Although promoters of private schools assume that private schools bring competition into the system and apply pressure to public schools, there is no evidence that public schools have responded to improve the quality of education. Although private schools may attract some good teachers and students from public schools, there seems to be no serious challenge to public schools, because public schools far outnumber private schools and have stable sources of finance, students and teachers (except schools in poor rural areas). In addition, as mentioned earlier, private schools have some trouble recruiting young teachers from colleges. It is possible that the government has some restrictions on the private schools regarding recruitment. Even college graduates have to pay a considerable "training fee" to the government before they gain approval to go abroad. The major competition for public schools seems still within the public school system, such as student performance at the Entrance Examination for Higher Education. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to believe that private schools' influence on public schools may be mostly indirect. Initially they influence the parents, educational professionals, policy makers, and the public, and then through these people, influence public schools. In the meantime, public schools may learn something from private schools about to improve their teaching, learning or management.

Yet this may be only the beginning. What will be the future of private schools? It is hard to tell. Nonetheless, currently the social and economic trends in China seem favorable for the development of private schools. The economic reform has created a market for private education. Some parents have the desire and ability to buy it. Meanwhile, funds for opening private schools are more available than before because of the development of private enterprise. With the reform of the economic system, a lot of state enterprise and public property has been privatized. The implication for reform for the school system is that the government knows that free enterprise can do a good job, whereas bureaucracies have become the government's burden. The government wants to further decentralize the financing and management of the school system. With regard to developing non-governmental schools, the SEC director has said that the main thing to do should be to make changes in existing schools, that is, changing public schools into public schools with private assistance or into non-governmental schools with public assistance or fully non-governmental schools. Is this a first sign of "privatising public schools"?

The Chinese government is now discussing how best to decentralize its responsibility for public schools to private agencies or individuals. Would it someday follow the route of charter schools or other models of school choice such as "public vouchers", or modify one of these models to adapt to China's situation?

The emergence of private schools is a harbinger of a new wave of educational reform. Traditionally (after 1949), China's educational reform had always been from the top down, initiated by the central government and implemented by local governments and schools. But the emergence and development of private schools is from the bottom up, driven by the free market-economic forces. The development of private schools goes ahead of government policy-making. This bottom-up movement of private schooling suggests that the role of the Chinese government in education is diminishing, and that the market economy has become a strong force in the shaping of the Chinese school system.

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