China Perspectives

2020-1 | 2020

Sights and Sounds of the Cold War in Socialist China
and Beyond

VICKERS, Edward, and Xiaodong ZENG. 2017.
Education and Society in Post-Mao China. Abingdon,
London: Routledge.

Chenyu Wang

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/chinapersonpectives/10022>

DOI: 10.4000/chinapersonpectives.10022

ISSN: 1996-4617

Publisher

Centre d'étude français sur la Chine contemporaine

Printed version

Date of publication: 1 March 2020

Number of pages: 55-56

ISSN: 2070-3449

Electronic reference

Chenyu Wang, "VICKERS, Edward, and Xiaodong ZENG. 2017. *Education and Society in Post-Mao China*. Abingdon, London: Routledge.", *China Perspectives* [Online], 2020-1 | 2020, Online since 01 March 2020, connection on 02 July 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/chinapersonpectives/10022> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/chinapersonpectives.10022>

This text was automatically generated on 2 July 2021.

© All rights reserved

VICKERS, Edward, and Xiaodong ZENG. 2017. *Education and Society in Post-Mao China*. Abingdon, London: Routledge.

Chenyu Wang

- 1 In *Education and Society in Post-Mao China*, Vickers and Zeng present readers with a well-researched and thorough overview of the post-Mao era education system, paying particular attention to issues of ideology, finance, and the place of education within an emerging middle-class society. They ask, how has the Chinese education system evolved during the past four decades as the world witnessed China's geopolitical rise in the global arena? How does the contemporary Chinese education system work, and why does it work in the way that it does? More importantly, how can we interpret Chinese students' educational success, exemplified by the PISA assessments? Reviewing primarily macro-level policy documents and micro-level accounts of schooling experience, the authors produce a coherent narrative about the shifts and changes in Chinese education in the past four decades.

- 2 Chapters One and Two frame the approach of the book. In Chapter One, Vickers and Zeng identify four approaches in the existing literature about Chinese education and insert this book into the debate. That is, this monography draws from what they call a “critical perspective” (p. 7) and seeks to describe the “shifting ethical and ideological premises” of Chinese education (p. 9). In Chapter Two, the authors further contextualise Chinese education in the East Asian cultural traditions, highlighting the authors’ attention to the cultural and ideological forces that shape the Chinese education system. The rest of the book analyses the politics of change in Chinese schooling from the pre-school to higher education levels. Recognising the significance of school curriculum and teacher training in the Chinese education system, the authors further provide two chapters on these topics. The authors conclude the book with a discussion on how globalisation has shaped Chinese education, including study abroad, the internationalisation of secondary education, the increasing number of Sino-foreign partnerships, and the Chinese drive for “world-class universities.”
- 3 A recurring theme in the monograph is the systematic inequality in the Chinese education system across all levels. The authors argue that the Chinese education system privileges the urban and the rich, through the *hukou* (户口, household registration) system, funding structure, the invention of *suzhi* (素質, human quality) discourse, the commodification of higher education, and the university entrance quota. Despite the official egalitarian, socialist principles, the education system disadvantages students born in areas that are classified as rural and less-developed provinces. The authors demonstrate this through their extensive use of literature written in both Chinese and English and statistical data from the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics and large-scale studies, such as Stanford University’s Rural Education Action Project. The use of both Chinese and English literature is a major strength of the monograph.
- 4 Another strength of this study lies in the authors’ extensive use of official documents in the analyses. Given the Chinese government’s central role in the planning and operation of education at all levels, reading the governmental policy documents closely and critically provides substantial empirical evidence vis-à-vis the issues they discuss. In doing so, the authors highlight the instrumentalist logic that drives education policy-making and reform in China. They argue that the goals of the Chinese education system are to create politically conforming and economically innovative citizens, rather than critical thinkers. Such an instrumentalist rationale also leads to the deepening urban-rural educational divide in China.
- 5 Relatedly, the authors also contextualise the policy documents in the political twists and turns within the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) during the past four decades, including the 1989 Tiananmen tragedy. Through this, they show the contingent nature of Chinese education reforms: the directions of change reflect not only the economic ambitions of the Chinese state, but also political conflicts within the Party leadership that are sometimes a result of the Party leaders’ idiosyncrasies.
- 6 The monograph closes on a gloomy note. As the authors rightly point out, “the possibly central challenge” confronting China’s leadership today is the creation of “a more unified and more equitable nationwide system for providing education and other public goods” (p. 78), and in the concluding chapter, they argue that the current discourse of Chinese educational excellence in international assessment regimes ostensibly masks the growing urban-rural divide and the challenge of equity. In other words, enshrining the PISA results – and the “Shanghai myth” (p. 333) – further

demonstrates how the purpose of education, in contemporary China, has been reduced to the creation of human capital. While this is an accurate interpretation of the official discourse, the authors created the impression that Chinese teachers, students, and parents alike have wholeheartedly accepted this ideology, relentlessly using education for their pursuit of competitive advancement in a globalising Chinese society. Yet, recent ethnographic evidence shows that Chinese educators and students are actively seeking to revive the meaning of education via alternative educational practices, include classic reading and service-learning programs (Billioud and Thoraval 2007; Hansen 2013; Wang 2019; Wu 2019). Although such pursuits are intertwined with urban citizens' pursuit of distinction, these emerging practices represent the collective yearning of education for ethical self-cultivation, a rather Confucian interpretation of the purpose of education. The authors could have discussed how Chinese students and teachers have responded to educational reforms. This would add another perspective to their analyses of the educational reforms, highlighting the on-the-ground realities of schooling in contemporary China.

- 7 Another minor critique relates to the authors' insufficient explanation of some Chinese-specific terminology. Perhaps it is precisely due to the authors' extensive knowledge of the political and educational system in China that the narrative can sometimes be confusing. For example, in the discussion of Chinese party politics, terms such as "princeling" and "red second generation" (p. 77) could be further explained. This would make the book more accessible to general readers who do not have sufficient background knowledge of Chinese politics.
- 8 Overall, *Education and Society in Post-Mao China* is essential reading for anyone interested in understanding Chinese education and society. The authors provide readers with a timely and thorough monograph on the politics of educational change in post-Mao China.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BILLIOUD, Sébastien, and Joël THORAVALL. 2007. "Jiaohua: The Confucian revival in China as an educative project." *China Perspectives* 4(72): 4-20.

HANSEN, Anders Sybrandt. 2013. "The Temporal Experience of Chinese Students Abroad and the Present Human Condition." *Journal of Current Chinese Affairs* 3(44): 49-77.

WANG, Chenyu. 2019. "Service-learning in Rural China." *Anthropology News website*, 12 July 2019. DOI: 10.1111/AN.1216.

WU, Jinting. 2019. "Confucian Revival and the Hybrid educational Narratives in Contemporary China: A Critical Rethinking of Scale in Globalization and Education." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 17(4): 474-88. DOI: 10.1080/14767724.2018.1558048.

AUTHOR

CHENYU WANG

Chenyu Wang is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Hamilton College, USA. Kirner-Johnson 242, 198 College Hill Road, Hamilton College, Clinton, NY 13323, USA. cwang1@hamilton.edu