

Policy Analysis: On Chinese Higher Education Entry Policy

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Abstract

With the arrival of the new century, the Chinese government decided to increase the university enrolment rate to 15% of the college age population by the year 2005 and the plan has been put into action since 1999. The plan is to take Chinese higher education from an "elite" to a "mass" stage (Trow, 1974) and it is also a response to the influence of globalization on Chinese higher education, which causes many university candidates to look for higher education opportunities abroad. The policy is likely to meet its goal well before time. However successful implementation does not necessarily bring satisfactory effects. The paper analyses the policy through historical comparison of the current and previous higher education entry policies and tries to identify the nature of the change. It also critically analyses the complexities in these policy settlements and reveals the advantaged and disadvantaged groups in the society under these policies. The paper argues that the current policy is greatly influenced by the neo-liberal economic settlement, globalization, and the demands of Chinese citizens. While the policy has provided more chances for students to go to university, at the same time, it has disadvantaged the students from lower socioeconomic family backgrounds, making it even harder for them to get access to higher education and limiting their social mobility. The paper also suggests that the policy may increase the gap between the rich and the poor, and the social stability accordingly if appropriate solutions are not found.

Introduction

This paper provides a critical historiography (Gale, 2001) of Chinese higher education entry policy. It argues that under the influence of the country's changing political and economic values in different historical epochs, participation in Chinese higher education has shifted from an elite to a mass system (Trow, 1974) although access is now restricted to those with sufficient resources to afford growing tuition and associated fees. In explaining this shift, around five and a half decades of Chinese history are roughly divided into three periods, from 1949 when the People's Republic of China was founded until 2005 when the enrolment goal of the current higher education policy was originally planned to be reached. These three entry settlements are identified below as: a political-assessed entry settlement (1949 – 1978), a diversified entry settlement (1978 – 1999), and an emerging mass entry settlement (1999 – 2005). In a separate section, between these second and third settlements, we also include an exploration of the crises that led to the current mass system, which is the main focus of our analysis. Rather than represent these periods as discrete, such periodization seeks to provide a systematic account of the trajectory of the changes in Chinese higher education entry and 'to expose the possible relationships between the social-educational present and the social-educational past' (Kincheloe, 1991, p.234).

Data for this analysis are documentary, drawn from primary sources (such as government policies and green papers (policies in draft), reports, and statistics, and university records and reports) and secondary sources (such as relevant academic literature and newspaper articles). In analyzing this data we are interested in providing: (1) 'a systematic account of selected past events; initially through their analytical separation from present events and from those that do not contribute to an understanding of "entry" but also through their subsequent "division" into distinctive historical epochs' (Gale 1999: 70); and (2) 'a critical examination of the data that is concerned not just with an episode in the history of ideas but also, and more crucially, with critical sociological questions about who benefits from particular university entrance arrangements' (Gale 1999: 70). Guided by the questions asked by critical policy historiography, we begin by: (1) examining the 'public issues' and 'private troubles' in these three periods and identifying the reasons why previous settlements were replaced in order to identify the nature of the changes; (2) explaining the complexities in these different policy domains; and (3) exploring critical sociological questions about who is advantaged and who is disadvantaged within these different higher education entry settlements. Preceding this discussion is an overview of the common features of Chinese higher education entry across time, particularly focused on their contribution to an elite system.

Elite higher education in the People's Republic of China

Martin Trow (1974) contends that the development of higher education can be divided into three stages: an *elite* stage, where universities enrol 15% of the college age population, a *mass* stage, where 15-50% are enrolled, and a *universal* stage where over 50% are enrolled. Analysis of current economic data suggests that a country's higher education gross enrolment ratio is strongly related to its per-capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP). When this is below US\$1000, higher education is usually in the elite stage, whereas the massification of higher education starts when per-capita GDP lies between US\$1000-3000 (Green Paper, 2000, p.88). Historically, access to Chinese higher education has been the privilege of an elite, at least since 1949, and has only expanded to mass participation more recently. One explanation for this is that China is a developing country with the largest population in the world. Only in 2003 did its per-capita GDP reach US\$1090, making mass higher education economically feasible.

Compounding this problem of limited financial resources to support its large population, most institutions of higher education in China are owned and operated by government, accounting for 89% of all such institutions, whereas only 11% are privately owned. In 2004, for example, there were 548 public adult institutions; 2 private adult institutions; 1067 public universities and 197 private universities (Ministry of Education, 2004). Although economic reform and a market model of public provision have grown in importance in China, with universities increasingly encouraged to seek funds from other sources, government funds still comprise the largest portion of university income. As a result, the development of Chinese higher education has been restricted by limited government investment,ⁱ which historically has supported only a small number of outstanding students.

The admission of these students into higher education institutions has been officially controlled in two main ways: through strict enrolment quotas and a centralized examination process. With respect to the

first, 'enrolment quotas in specific institutions and specific majors/specialties are assigned to an institution according to a national plan' (Cheng, 1988, p.21). Until recently, the country has maintained very restrictive quotas on higher education enrolments, in part because most tertiary student expenses were met by government but also because of a particular political ideology. Hence, under the planned-economy system that operated before 1978, 'institutions were not allowed to admit students outside the state plan' (Cheng, 1988, p.21), even if students had the resources and the desire to meet the necessary costs themselves. As discussed more fully below, variation to these quotas began to emerge in the 1990s, building from 1995 and legitimated in 1999 under a revised entry policy with a target of mass higher education by 2005.

The second explicit form of control on tertiary student numbers is China's examination system, which comes under the strict control of the Ministry of Education. Except for the period of the Cultural Revolution when all examinations were abolished, students' admission depended and still depends upon their total scores in the unified national College Entrance Examination, subject to government quotas. As a rule, admission is granted on the basis of academic, physical and moral qualifications, although allowances are made for minority nationalities (Education in China, 2002). However, in practice, matriculation is normally granted to those who do well enough in the 3-day nationwide examination, held once every year.ⁱⁱ Examination scores required to enter particular universities can also vary, related to the prestige of the university and the desirability of the regions in which they are located. That is, quotas operate at the level of institutions and courses rather than at a more general level.

The current examination, administered by the Ministry of Education, entails two compulsory components: a generalist component and a specialist component; a model commonly referred to as '3+3'. The generalist component requires students to be examined in the three subjects of Chinese, mathematics and English. The specialist component requires students to be examined in three additional subjects in the humanities or in science and engineering. In the humanities category these are specified as politics, history and geography, whereas in the science and engineering category they are physics, chemistry and biology. However, since the early 1980s when Shanghai became the first province to opt out from examination in the full suite of specialist subjects, more and more provinces have followed its example. These provinces follow a model referred to as '3+x', which means in addition to the 3 generalist subjects, candidates are examined in another one or two from the above named specialist subjects according to the courses they wish to pursue. Matriculation is still determined in the light of the total scores of the examination.

Because university education has been regarded as a secure route to well-paid employment and highly respected places in Chinese society – encouraging most students to aim at entering university – pre-college education has been forced to 'dance to the baton' of college entrance examinations. "From the time students enter this school", comments an administrator at one of China's most famous middle schools, "the objective is to help them get into college" (Pepper, 1984, p. 31). It is an objective that resonates in other parts of the world as well. In Australia, for example:

Almost from their inception, secondary schools have maintained a goal of preparing their students for university study. ... [until recently] the lure of university study continued to drive subject selection, development and assessment, particularly at the upper secondary level. (Gale, 1994, p.48)

In China, the tensions that the examinations generate weigh heavily on the minds of students, parents and the public at large. Within the local press there are stories of 'schools devoting the entire senior year to exam preparation; students themselves drawing up daily cram schedules that go non-stop from 6:00 am to 10:30 pm; and parents telling their children not to return home if they fail to gain admission to college' (Pepper, 1984, p.38). The cause of these problems seems to be the single-minded pursuit of a school's pass rate into university. Indeed, the prestige of a secondary school is derived from its high pass rate and parents choose schools according to these. Even though many are aware of the harmful effects on students of cramming and competition, almost all schools and teachers actively seek to enrol students with the potential for achieving high examination scores.

All pre-collegiate education focuses on the subjects in this examination and devotes less attention to developing students' abilities in other areas, such as music, the arts and sport. Vocational education is also under-developed. Students in vocational education institutions are usually considered inferior to university students and most of the time they are not as competitive as university graduates in the labour market. This makes the competition to enter university even more severe. One consequence is a 'bottle-neck' of students seeking university entry but unable to gain it because of the restricted enrolment rates.

To many high school graduates, the examination period is referred to as the 'black days' in their lives because the marks they get in this once-only examination can dramatically determine their future. A university degree is generally considered a necessary requirement for a better career and future social status. For a student from a peasant's family, this can be even regarded as the only chance to change his/her identity since Chinese citizens have long been divided into urban and rural residences with greater restrictions for the latter in order to limit the population mobility from rural to urban places and hence maintain the current urban-rural balance. According to Seeberg (1998, P.213), 'in 1982, higher education students were 84% urban and 15% rural, or a 5:1 urban-rural student ratio, whereas the total population ratio was almost the inverse, 1:4'. Clearly, in an elite entry system, only a small number of academic elites are endowed with this opportunity while the majority are excluded from the higher education system by the very limited national planned enrolment quota.

Because enrolment also depends upon students' examination results, academic intelligence appears as an essential condition to achieve entry. Some believe that this enrolment system favors the offspring of the existing well-educated elite over the less well-educated majority. In other words, the education background of one's family may be a crucial factor in determining a student's learning ability and hence the student's marks in the examination. For example, Western et al. (1998, p.11) identify large collections of research demonstrating that 'students from low socioeconomic backgrounds display the lowest access and participation rate, remaining under-represented in virtually all fields and

levels of study'. This socioeconomic status, which 'comprises the three main dimensions: occupation, education and wealth' (Western, et al. 1998, p.xi), of the students' family backgrounds significantly influences their academic achievements. Students from higher socioeconomic status family backgrounds are influenced positively in their career interests, with positive role models and are provided more information resources for higher education than other social groups (Williams et al., 1993b). Although there are no official statistics about college students' family socioeconomic background in China, in Pepper's (1983) research she finds that most people interviewed agree that the proportion of intellectuals' children getting into college is larger than that of workers' and peasants' children. It seems that the children's future has been decided by their parents' academic abilities before they are born. In this way, examination-based and merit-based higher education enrolment systems benefit students with higher socioeconomic status.

The school's facilities, the teaching material, the teacher's experiences and other circumstances also influence students' results in the exams. In order to get good results in the college entrance examination, students have to compete with each other to enter into the key middle schools where better education quality is guaranteed. Pepper (1983) also finds that in 1980, among 1,342 freshmen in Fudan University (one of the elite universities in China), only twenty-odd were from the countryside while 70% were from key middle schools. This suggests that urban students are more favored in the educational system than students from rural places where educational facilities are normally insufficient and undeveloped.

The disparities in the system exist not only between urban and rural areas but also between the eastern and western parts of China. There are 415 higher education institutions in the east, 2.9 times more than that in the west where only 142 tertiary institutions are located (Green Paper, 2001, p.94). This implies that students from the regions where more universities are situated may have more chances than those from other regions. Yang (2004) argues that the current university admissions policy is discriminative, giving preference to students from the major cities and with a quota system that favours students from the same localities as the universities. Most Chinese universities are located in major coastal cities in the eastern area of China and remain aloof from the vast hinterland (Hayhoe, 1996). In 1998, the national average enrolment ratio among the candidates was 36% and the highest (60% in Shanghai, the eastern coastal city) was 3 times as much as the lowest (21%, Gansu, a city in the west of China) (*Zhongguo Jiaoyu Bao*, April 7, 2002, p2).

Though before 1999 Chinese higher education could be described as elite, in different historical periods, the policy has varied. This is hardly surprising since policies are 'ideological and political artefacts which have been constructed within a particular historical and political context' (Burton & Weiner, 1990, p.205). In what follows we utilise a critical policy historiography to identify these differences and analyze the changes to discern the relations between these policy settlements in different historical periods as well as critically analyze whose interests are highlighted in these periods.

Political-assessed entry (1949 - 1978)

The period between 1949 and 1978 is rather complex. It includes some critical events in Chinese history such as 'the early socialist construction' (1949-1957), 'the Great Leap' (1958-1965), and 'the Cultural Revolution' (1966-1976) (Hayhoe, 1996, p.73). Without doubt, higher education policy has been influenced by these political and economic contexts and changed over time in relation to these. However, there is a common characteristic in this period: working class citizens and peasants were declared to be owners of the country and their interests were embodied in the country's higher education policies accordingly. An important approach to guarantee access by the working classes to higher education was to provide free (government funded) higher education. In this period, no university students paid tuition or accommodation fees (both were provided by the government) and every student received similar financial support, a 'People's Grant' to cover their basic living expenses. The students, irrespective of whether they were from rich or poor families, cities or rural places, were treated as equal in universities. 'Their different economic backgrounds were virtually ignored in this egalitarian distribution of financial support funding' (Zhang, 1998, p.239).

However, one obvious difference in the higher education entry policies of this period is that during the culture revolution, the college entrance examination was totally abolished and many formal universities closed. This reflects a significant change not only in the policy, but also a change in the values of the country's policy makers. Accounting for these shifts in values, the period can be divided into two subsections: the socialist construction period (1949-1966) and the cultural revolution period (1966-1976). Each of these is addressed in turn.

Socialist construction (1949 - 1966)

Our educational policy must enable everyone who receives an education to develop morally, intellectually and physically and become a worker with both socialist consciousness and culture. (Mao Zedong, 1957, p. 23)

The first national conference on Chinese higher education was held in 1950, shortly after the People's Republic of China was newly founded. The conference set forth the main task for future higher education development: to serve the economic construction of the country (Zhu, 2000). A merit-based system of entry, the national unified examination system was put in place in 1955 to ensure a fair distribution of candidates to different universities according to their academic abilities. Special provisions were made to accelerate opportunities for students from working class and peasant family backgrounds to enter the higher education system (Hayhoe, 1996). One of these provisions was called 'political assessment' which guaranteed a certain proportion of university students from working class and peasant family backgrounds. The proportion of these students increased quickly, with 4 times as many in 1958 than in 1952, so that they accounted for 36.49% of the entire university student population (Peking Review, 1958, p.16, cited in Zhang, 1998, p.241). Such higher education policy with deliberate provisions that favor certain social groups 'effectively blur[red] the urban/rural distinction' (Pepper, 1984, p.108).

However, in return for their free higher education, graduates had to accept the jobs assigned to them according to the country's need. Under the country's socialist and egalitarian system, a university degree did not deliver to graduates much higher salaries than other members of society. Nevertheless, they were highly respected for their perceived ability to make greater contributions to the country's socialist construction. Hence, a university degree had high social value although limited economic value.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

It is necessary for intellectual students to go the countryside and be re-educated by poor or average peasants. (Mao Zedong, 1968)

The Cultural Revolution proved to be a disaster for Chinese higher education. Because it emphasized a particular social practice, teaching in all higher education institutions ceased. 'Universities and colleges were attacked as places of disseminating bourgeois ideologies, and were not allowed to enroll students for more than 4 years' (Min, 1997, p.39). Students and staff were deployed to the countryside and to factories to receive re-education by peasants and workers with a proletarian consciousness (Xiao, p.195). Not surprisingly, many higher education institutions were shut down although a remnant still remained. On July 21, 1968, Mao stated that 'it is still necessary to have universities. Here we refer mainly to colleges of science and engineering'. He went on to indicate that students should be chosen from workers and peasants with practical experience (People's Daily, 22/07/1968). In replacing 'capitalist type' universities, the radicals created new models of universities for workers, cadres and peasants. Xiao (1998, p.195) describes these new models as: 'July 21 Workers Universities', 'May 7 Cadres' Schools' and 'Chaoyan Agricultural Universities' and certainly 'proletarian politics and communist ideology became the core curriculum' in these universities.

The entrance examination was suspended from 1967 and 'entrance was based on recommendation' (Hayhoe, 1996, p.100). This meant political criteria were extremely important and whether a student could go to university on the whole depended upon their 'political assessment'.

The intention was for the non-formal track of education to take over from the formal, for all elitism and selectivity to be abolished in favour of open access to education for the broad masses of peasants and workers, and for successful economic and political development to be engineered from below, by grass-roots activism, rather than from above, by technological expertise and macro-planning. (Hayhoe, 1996, p.99)

In short, the Cultural Revolution was a period in which higher education's general functions and purposes were replaced. Preference was given to workers and peasant classes to enter university through political assessment and recommendation. Higher education in this period was almost destroyed in terms of its basic function as promoting academic ability. Instead, it expanded the struggle between different social classes and made higher education an overt tool for political struggle.

Diversified entry settlement (1978 - 1999)

It does not matter if it is a yellow cat or a black cat, as long as it catches mice. (Deng Xiaoping, 1962, p.293)

1978 is an important year that divides Chinese history. After the death of Mao in 1976, Deng Xiaoping returned to power and initiated a series of changes. The reform period began with a major national conference in April 1978, which 'abandoned the Cultural Revolution goals of class struggle and adopted modernization of the country as the main goal for educational development' (Hayhoe, 1996, p.118). This was a period of experimentation, when different means of developing the country were tried to find ways that matched China's unique characteristics. Several new policies were initiated. Some involved improvements and adjustments to previous policies while others were bold attempts to produce new ways of doing things. In higher education, this involved the restoration of unified national entrance examinations for determining entry in 1977-1978, and a remarkable new era of rapid expansion for higher education.

The new period ended the overt political struggle among China's social classes and put the focus of the country on economic construction and the country's modernization. The economic reform in this period encouraged people to get rich by all means. With the diversification and liberalization of the economy also came increased categorisation of higher education institutions and enrolment of students. The private economy was also recovered. In 1978, the way was made clear by the Chinese Central Communist Party Committee (CCCCPC) for privately-owned institutes to operate, although it was not until 1982 that the first private educational institute opened in Beijing (Mok & Chan, 1998).

In addition, the principals of a market economy brought historical changes to Chinese higher education. Gradually, higher education ceased to be the free right of every student who could meet the entry standards and became a service funded through user-pays mechanisms that varied according to student types. Before 1980, all university students were referred to as 'state-plan' students and they were exempt from tuition and accommodation fees. However, by 1980, 1000 students who were either self-supporting or sponsored by enterprises were admitted by 24 institutions in Shanghai (Zhang, 1998). The enrolment of such students spread to universities nationwide such that the '*Decision on the Reform of Educational Structure* in 1985 officially approved this approach' (Zhang, 1998, p.243). By 1994, the proportion of self-supporting or enterprise sponsored students comprised over 28% of the entire university student population (Education Statistics Yearbook of China, 1994). However, the number of such students was also limited by the national quota system and also based on their scores in the college entrance examination, which can be a little lower than 'state-plan' students.

As Cheng (1998, p.22) explains, 'In 1989, institutions were allowed to collect fees for accommodation and sundry items' even from 'state-plan' students, though the amount was rather small, around ¥100 or so. Since 1994, these fees have increased for state-plan students to include tuition fees (Zhang,

1998). 'In practice, the fee levels are fixed not according to costs, but rather by the market – according to what students can afford and according to the prospective returns to the graduates' (Cheng, 1998, p.22). Hence, much higher fees were charged in rich provinces like Guangdong than in the less developed regions. Their tuition fees varied by around ¥2000 between the different regions (¥1800 in Anhui province and ¥ 3600 in Guangdong province, Zhang, 1998). Meanwhile, some courses, such as foreign languages and business studies, became more popular and more expensive, since graduates with these majors earned more than other majors in the labor market.

In this period, political assessment lost its significance with respect to student enrolment. What mattered were students' scores in the college entrance examination and their ability to pay the fees. Though the number of students enrolled each year increased gradually within this diversified enrolment settlement, which provided greater access to university but still restricted by the national quota system, it was still the academic and socioeconomic elites who had more chances in such an entry settlement. Influenced by the Chinese people's traditional high value on higher education and with the development of the country's economy, the elite settlement that was realized through the low quota system became a critical issue in the development of higher education in China.

The elite higher education settlement in crisis

In 1979, after years of encouraging reproduction, the Chinese government implemented a policy known as the one-child policy. This policy, while restrictive in many ways, allows families to concentrate their resources on one child, thus leading to the possibility for higher standards of education. Furthermore, women, especially urban women, are able to concentrate on their careers instead of raising lots of children. With two incomes and one child, a couple has more to spend on their child's education. Moreover, the family's future and parents' expectation are bound up with the success or otherwise of this only child. As a result, many families place their child's education first on their list of expenditures, saving as much as they can for the child's education. After years of economic construction, living standards have greatly improved and more and more families are able to pay for the increased expenditure on education for their child.

In fact, Chinese people have a long tradition that highly values their children's academic achievements. This may originate from Confucius, who advocated the necessity of the hierarchy of people and choosing rulers 'based not on hereditary status but on individual merit' (Ho, 1962, p.6). Confucius' ideal was of a hierarchical society in which all people had an opportunity to access education, with those demonstrating their excellence in study and virtue occupying the top level of the hierarchy (Ho, 1962). Schoenhals (1993) argues that because of such meritocratic ideals, traditionally, large numbers of China's officials were defined by examinations at different levels. Recently, this tradition has been re-established in the recruitment of junior civil servants. Once again, 'the better the examination results, the better the chances of winning a good government position' (Schoenhals, 1993, p.42) and hence hold a place on the top of the hierarchy. Influenced by Confucius' thought, Chinese people believe in the significance and value of examination, which is considered to be an effective and fair means to select the elites who are qualified to be on the top of the social hierarchy;

to be officials or leaders, a privileged class. For many, the examination is considered a ladder towards success and upward mobility in society for ordinary people.

By 1999, enrolment in primary education in China exceeded 99% of the eligible cohort, while the rates for junior high school and senior high school exceeded 88% and 41% respectively (Education Statistics Report, 2003). For people who have studied for 12 years in school, the college entrance exam is more than a touchstone of their schooling. It is also a bridge leading to their future success. As noted above, it is even more important for students from the rural and western regions since this may be the only chance for them to leave under-developed areas, where they are restricted by the registered residence system, and move to more developed regions, living and working there with legitimate identities and enjoying local privileges. Hence, the annual national college entrance exam is also viewed as a life turning point because each year only a few can be singled out due to the very limited planned enrolment figure. Similar to what Skilbeck and Esnault (1993) have found regarding higher education expansion in OECD countries in the 1960s to 1970s, economic and social demand are ahead of educational institutions and 'the demand side is moving faster than the supply side is sometimes able to respond' (p.1).

The globalization of higher education is also impacting on China. Many higher education exporting countries, like Germany, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, have adjusted their policies to attract overseas students and China, in particular, is seen as an important market because of its size. Since China opened its doors to the world in 1978, overseas higher degrees and English as the world's most widely used language have increased in value, not least because they have shown distinct advantages for students, securing for them decent jobs and promotions. Because a student's chances of being accepted by a university in his or her own country are rare, caused by a very low enrolment ratio and fierce competition, more and more parents send their children to overseas universities regardless of the astonishingly high tuition fees.

The strong unmet demand for higher education by the Chinese people, then, is met by students going abroad to get overseas higher degrees. However, due to these countries' immigration policies, many young Chinese who have acquired higher degrees in foreign countries have settled down in those countries. According to the statistics of MOE (2004), from 1978 to 2003, there are altogether 700.2 thousand people studying abroad, yet only 172.8 thousand among them have returned back to China. This is a huge loss of the country's talented young people and for all aspects of the country's development needs.

A third crisis in Chinese higher education and education more broadly is related to China's expanding economy. The World Bank's China Higher Education Reform Project (World Bank, 1997) has shown that China has a fast-growing economy with an annual average GDP growth rate of 9.8% between 1978 and 1994. This has presented major challenges to the nation's higher education system, which undertakes the task of generating knowledge for its long-term development effort. Since its accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, China has had to meet increasing demands for highly skilled professionals and talented people in many fields. In relation to the pressure of the growing market economy, higher education has begun to face some problems, such as the human resource constraints on the country's economic and social development. Therefore, the current poor condition of Chinese higher education is regarded as a hindrance to the country in its economic progress. This

may have serious implications for the sustainability of economic growth and long-term social development in China because the country needs a large number of well-educated and talented people for national construction. There is considerable consensus in China that in the education arena it needs to expand higher education in line with the needs of social and economic development.

Moreover, in 1998, China was also greatly affected by the Asian Economic Crisis and some economists suggested that enrolling more students would require building more classroom buildings, laboratories, libraries, dining halls, and dormitories, as well as hiring more faculty members, staff, and campus workers. Enrolling more students provides its own stimulus to the development of the country's economy. Faced with these challenges to economic and social development, and following the advice of its economists, from 1999, the country began to radically increase the higher education enrolment ratio.

Mass entry settlement (1999 - 2005)

The strength of the nation is based on education, which is the responsibility of *every individual*.
(Jiang Zemin, 1999)

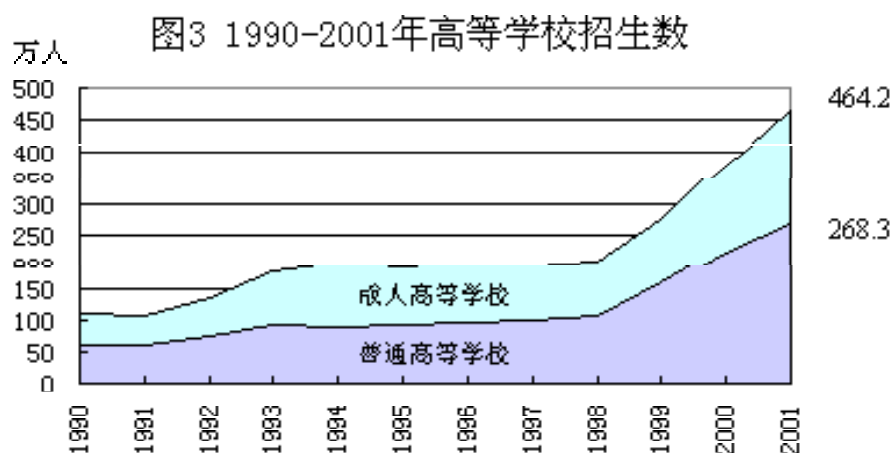
To mark the beginning of the new century, in 1999, the CCCPC and the State Council issued *Decisions on Deepening Educational Reform and Improving Quality-oriented Education in an All-round Way*, drawing up an overall plan for establishing a vigorous educational system with Chinese socialist characteristics in the 21st century. In the same year, the State Council approved *The Action Plan to revitalize education towards the 21st Century* submitted by the Ministry of Education. Within these documents, one of the most significant tasks for higher education was to increase university enrolment rates from 9% in 1999 to 15% of the college age population by 2010 (Green Paper, 1999)ⁱⁱⁱ. Since then there has been a considerable increase in the number of students enrolled in universities, jumping quickly in 2000 to 11%. However, this is still far below the world average (22%) of the mid-1990s (Green Paper, 2001, p.52). Therefore, in *the Ninth Five-year Plan (1996-2000)*, 'a moderate development of higher education' was replaced by 'an accelerated development of higher education' in *the Tenth Five-year Plan (2001-2005)*. It was subsequently decided that the goal of 15% was to be achieved by 2005. Once achieved, Chinese higher education will have reached Trow's (1974) mass stage.

Zhou Ji, the current Minister of Education, said at the 32nd general conference of UNESCO that 'China was possibly one of the countries that had undergone the most dramatic changes since 1998' (China Daily, 2003). The period since then has witnessed a significant increase in higher education enrolment in China allowing more students to have their university dreams fulfilled. This was realized first by raising the national planned enrolment quota as a percentage of those completing the college entrance examination. Since China's higher education system has been highly centralized in its institutional governance, national plans are normally carried out smoothly by governments at all levels. Hence, the national average quotas have been rising fast since 1999 when the policy was implemented. In 1990, only 27.3% of those completing the entrance examination proceeded to

university, and 46.1% in 1998, while in 1999, the rate rose sharply to 63.8% and in 2002, it reached 83.5% (MOE, 2003). In fact, the rise has been so sharp that China entered Trow's mass stage (15%) of higher education in 2002 (MOE, 2003) and by the end of 2003, the higher education gross enrolment ratio had reached 17% (MOE, 2004).

Figure 1 below illustrates this considerable upward trend in student enrolments after 1998, with increases greater than in previous years. In 2001, the total higher education student enrolment was 4.642 million (2.683 million in regular universities), over two times more than that in 1998 (2.086 million). Before 1999, the higher education enrolment was only slightly raised whereas in 1995 it was in decline. According to the Green Paper (2002, p.94), the number of students enrolled in regular tertiary institutes from 1998 to 2001 are respectively 1.084 million, 1.597 million, 2.206 million and 2.683 million. The average annual increasing rate in the period 1998-2000 is 35.3%. In sharp contrast, in the period 1978-1998 (20 years after renewing the national college entrance examination in 1978), the average rate was 5.1%. Even in 1995-1998, the years just before the new policy was implemented, the increased rate was only 5.4%. Clearly, the expansion in higher education enrolments in China since 1998 has been one of the most significant events in Chinese education and has brought great changes to the higher education system.

Figure 1: Student Enrolment in Chinese Higher Education 1990-2001



Source: National Bureau of Statistics of China (2002.10.25), 2002 Green Paper on Education in China (p.97)

However, higher education massification is not simply about increasing the number of students enrolled in universities. It involves changes in all aspects related to higher education. In analysing the period, it is important to identify who gets in to university and how they get in. Higher student enrolments also require more investment in higher education. More generally, 'policy does not emerge from a single source. A network of organizations, officials and politicians contribute to the whole process' (Marinetto, 1999, p.3). Apart from higher enrolment quotas, relevant policies and critical events in this period also need to be considered. Recent Chinese higher education entry policy also has been influenced by neo-liberalism, informed by such ideology as a market society, small government, and privatization. Considering the market economy which is influencing all aspects of

China's social life and the values of the country's leaders – that is, education is the 'responsibility of every individual – in this period, more higher learning chances are provided to students, and at the same time, more responsibilities are placed on students and/or their parents.

A user-pays approach to Chinese higher education

For China, a developing country with government as the primary provider of higher education, if there is not adequate economic support, investment and funds allocation to education, the goal of mass higher education will be impossible to achieve regardless of the strong and enthusiastic will of governments at all levels. Many practical problems, such as student dormitories, cafeterias and teaching facilities need to be resolved gradually and in a timely manner and all require financial support. In the 10th *National Five-Year Plan for Education*, the government promises to "improve the expenditure on education 1% more than the previous year every year, and requires local governments to do the same". The plan is that by 2005, "the national expenditure on education [will] make up 4% of the GDP". Yet, the government's Green Paper (2000, p.15) estimates are that while the 'national allocation may be increased visibly, the target of 4% may be impossible to realise'. Considering that China is a developing country with 1.5 billion people, funding increases tend to be very little and scarcely enough when divided by its large population. It is not easy for the Chinese government to educate 25% of the world's students on 1% of the world's education budget.

It is clearly stated in the 9th *Five-year Plan* that higher education is not compulsory. This has given legitimacy to higher education institutions to charge students tuition fees, a principle applied equally to 'state-plan', self-supported and 'enterprise-sponsored' students. They have all become 'tuition-paying students', their fees reflecting '25% of the cost of a course while the government subsidizes the remaining 75%' (Zhang, 1998, p.246). This reflects the ideology of the higher education policy articulated by China's former president Jiang (1999) that 'the strength of the nation is based on education which is the responsibility of every individual' (Third National Conference on Education, emphasis added).

Tuition plus living expenses represent a considerable amount of money for Chinese families, especially those with low-incomes. For example, for the 2000 academic year in Beijing, tuition fees ranged from ¥4,800 to ¥6,000 (Jiangnan Shibao, 08/06/2000). Stories are emerging of some students who have done very well in the College Entrance Exam and have been accepted by a university but have to give up the chance of attending because of being unable to pay the tuition. Among those enrolled in universities, the number of poor students is also quite high. Take Beijing University as an example; only 12% of the students get scholarships while 1.8% get grants-in-aid. However there are 25% of undergraduates and 7-8% of postgraduates having financial problems (Hai, 2004). To help pay for college, many students try to get work-study positions on campus or part-time work on weekends or in the vacations (People's Daily, 2002). Compared to an earlier study-focused participation, increasing numbers of university students spend less time and energy on their learning. To some degree, their studies will be more or less affected.

The market economy has also permeated the administration of universities. As well as their tuition fees, students also need to pay more for their accommodation and other services, which are now

provided not by universities but by business companies that have taken over the management of these student services and operate them as an industry to make profits. The introduction in 1999 of a user-pays system within Chinese higher education raises considerable concern, given that today there are still many people living in poverty in China. According to the *Zhongguo Jiaoyubao* (28/03, 2001, p.1, cited in Yang, 2004), in the late 1990s, when student fees are now regarded as relatively low compared to the years that followed, a student needed at least ¥10,000–10,500 annually. Such an amount was already astronomical for many families. Only 8% of students' families could cope with the whole amount on their own, 22% could only manage half of the amount, 44% could afford less than one third, and 10% of students felt absolutely helpless with the amount.

In a market economy, course fees are decided by the market. Therefore, some courses with greater prospective returns for graduates cost more than other courses, such as those in foreign languages, business and law. These courses are very hard for students from the poor family backgrounds to choose. Their socioeconomic status limits their choices to those subsidized by government and hence with lower tuition fees, such as teacher training, agriculture and forestry and mining. Consequently, when they graduate, the jobs available to them may not bring as much income as other students who choose higher-fee courses with greater prospects of higher incomes. Consequently, it is even harder for them to change their social economic status.

According to *China Statistics Yearbook* (2000, p.319, p.333), in 1999, the average income of each peasant in the east region was ¥3344.6, while in the west it was ¥1604.1. Similarly, the average income of urban residents in the east region was ¥9125.92, while in the west, it was ¥4472.91. In brief, 'the university fee policy does not favour those living in remote areas with little money' (Yang, 2004, p.359). These differences in income for people in different regions have become a serious issue that has the potential to affect social stability.

The values and ideology that form the current mass higher education policy are not all that different from those immediately following 1978, when such values and ideology were in their formative stage. However, the changes to tuition fees and the decentralization of government administration suggest that market economy principles and neo-liberalism have gradually become influential forces in China and the socialist and egalitarian system has been gradually replaced, even though leaders of the country name the current arrangements as a market economy with Chinese characteristics.

Emphasising universities located in China's eastern region

Similar to discussion of the elite stage after 1978, in the mass stage, the advantaged groups are typically urban and wealthy people, whereas disadvantaged groups are the poor located in rural areas. Of concern is that in the emerging mass stage of higher education, the gap between these groups is growing; the rich are getting richer and poor poorer, which may lead to new problems of social stability.

Disparities between the eastern coastal region and the western inland region have long been a serious issue in China. The gap between the two regions involves nearly every aspect of society

including economy, culture, and infrastructure facilities. Accordingly, education conditions are greatly effected and limited in the west. By way of illustration, the higher education enrolment gross rate has already reached or surpassed the target 15% in some affluent cities or provinces in the east, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Tianjin, Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Guangdong. In their respective local 'Tenth Five-year Plans,' the regions have different targeted gross enrolment rates they plan to reach by 2005. Some of them are shown in the following Table 1.

Table 1: Targeted higher education gross enrolment rate in local Tenth Five-year Plans

region	province	Gross enrolment ratio by 2005 (%)
east	Shanghai	55 ^{IV}
	Tianjin	40 ^V
	Fujian	30
	Jiangsu	25
	Liaoning	24
	Guangdong	16 ^{VI}
	Zhejiang	20
	Jilin	20
middle	Hebei	15
	Shanxi	14
	Henan	13
	Anhui	13
west	Innermongolia	14
	Guangxi	10
	Tibet	10
	Yunnan	8

Source: *Xin ShiJiChuDe FaZhan LanTu (Blueprint for the New Century)*, (2001). State Planning and Development Commission. Minzu Publishing House.

From the targeted higher education enrolment gross ratio, we can identify noticeable differences among and within the three regions. In the eastern coastal region, the gross ratio can be as much as 7 times higher than some provinces in the western region. Clearly, the opportunity for students to go to university can be much higher in the east than in the west.

Traditionally, the western region is also the economically less developed region. Except for government investment, it is very hard for this region to attract financial support for education from other sources. According to national statistics, in 1998 the average education provincial fund in the west was 5.076 billion, while in the east it was 15.74 billion, 3.1 times greater (Green Paper, 2001). In 1999, there were only 5 universities in the west aided by 'Project 211'^{vii}, while in the east there were 63, 12.6 times more than in the west (Green paper, 2001). These differences clearly demonstrate that the country is focusing on the development of higher education in the east rather than the west. It also suggests that the quality of universities in the west may not be as good as those in the east. In more recent times the government has begun to provide more support for the region by issuing the 'Plan to

Develop the Western Region' (Zhongguo Jiaoyubao, 27/04/2000). However such plans cannot be realized overnight.

In addition, in China, there are three types of public higher education institutions that vary according to which part of government administers them: institutions directly under (1) the Ministry of Education; (2) provincial government; or (3) national commissions or ministries. As the country's economy shifts from a centralized state-control model to a market model, the governance of Chinese higher education is also undergoing adjustment. At present, there remain only 72 among the 1605 government-run regular universities under the direct administration of the Ministry of Education (MOE, 2003) so that most of China's universities are now provincialized and localized. Such devolution and decentralization in Chinese education reform obviously benefits the students from the regions where more universities and colleges locate and leave the students from the western part of the country in an even more disadvantaged position.

Continuing gendered differences in accessing higher education

Traditionally, women do not have equal social status with men in China. Therefore, it is usually boys in a family who have priority in education. When a family experiences problems supporting its children's education, it is typically girls who first lose the opportunity of education. For example, according to the *China Statistics Yearbook* (2000), in 1999, 8.81% of males and 21.56% of females over 15 years old were illiterate or semiliterate. In the western region, the rates were even higher, with 11.56% of males and 25.93% of females recorded as illiterate. Because very few students could enroll in universities when Chinese higher education was in its elite stage, it was commonplace for girls to leave school and start work earlier than boys. Some of them even had no chance to sit the college entrance examination because their parents did not ever expect them to go to university. Though in the mass stage, more university places are provided to students, fees have become a major barrier on their way to higher education. These gender disparities are still very common in rural communities, where parents are more likely to spend their money on educating boys rather than girls. Though women's social status has improved a lot since China was founded, women, especially women in rural areas, are still disadvantaged by the heritage of an elite education system and in the mass entry system this situation has not changed considerably.

Devolving and privatising Chinese higher education

In the 10th National Five-Year Plan for Education (2001), the government also plans to 'increase its input into education and encourage, support and standardize the running of schools and tertiary institutions by non-governmental sectors or by Chinese-foreign cooperation'. 'To integrate non-government education establishments into the formal education system can help satisfy the large and growing demand, and the government will recognize the degrees they grant provided they have fulfilled accreditation standards'. After several years' discussion, *The Law on the Promotion of Non-governmental Education* (MOE, 2003) and *Regulations of the People's Republic of China on Chinese-Foreign Cooperation in Running Schools* (MOE, 2003) were finally approved by the Standing Committee of the Chinese National People's Congress and were made effective on September 1, 2003. Based on these documents, private education institutions should enjoy the same rights as public

ones. They will no longer be treated as inferior as they once were. In brief, the central government hopes to distribute its responsibility of providing education resources and opportunities to citizens to local governments and any individual or group who is capable of running schools and universities, including foreign investments.

Conclusion

In this paper we have utilised policy historiography to analyse Chinese higher education entry policy in different historical periods. Viewing the policy through this lens, we have identified that different social groups are advantaged and disadvantaged by different education policies within different historical periods of time. We have also demonstrated how education policy has close connections with economic and political settlements and to some extent they are determined by these settlements.

With an understanding of policy as process, it is hard to separate a policy abruptly into isolated and static periods or stages by specific dates. In reality, China's higher education entry policies in all three periods are closely interrelated and even overlap to some extent. However, with changes to social, political and economic contexts, the above higher education entry settlements also vary in line with the values of the times. In short, the successful implementation of a policy involves the collaborative effects of political will, adequate resources, institutionalised structures, adequate time and minimal stages and strategy. Considering the higher education entry policy we analyse is from China, a strong interventionist state in which power is centralized, it is not surprising, then, that political will plays a significant role in the successful implementation of this national policy on higher education entry.

Endnotes

ⁱ In 1998, government expenditure on education accounted for only 2.55% of the nation's GDP. (*Green Paper on Education in China*, 2000, p.15)

ⁱⁱ Since 1999, as a means to accelerate the university enrolment ratio, candidates have been given an extra opportunity each year. However, the scheme has been coolly received from both universities and candidates and in 2004 only three provinces organized such an exam.

ⁱⁱⁱ According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics (1998-1999), the gross tertiary enrolment ratio (total enrolment in tertiary education regardless of age, expressed as a percentage of the population in the five-year age group following on from the secondary-school leaving age) in China was 7%, while at the same time, Canada was 59%; New Zealand, 65%. Other Asian countries, such as Japan was 44%; Malaysia, 23%; Mongolia, 26%; Thailand, 31%; Viet Nam, 11%.

^{iv} In 2002, the ratio in Shanghai was over 40% (*Green Paper on Education in China (2002)* Beijing: Education Science Publishing House. p.50).

^v In 2002, the ratio in Tianjin was 30% (*Green Paper on Education in China (2002)* Beijing: Education Science Publishing House. p.50).

^{vi} In the local Tenth Five-year Plan, Guangdong's targeted rate is 16%. With the new governor's arrival to the province, the targeted rate has increased to 21%. YanJiu BaoGao: *GaoDeng JiaoYu DaZhongHua Yu GuangZhou Shi GaoDeng JiaoYu GaiGe Yu FaZhan YanJiu (Research Report: Research on Higher Education Massification and Higher Education Reform and Development in Guangzhou)* Education Institute of Zhongshan University, 2004.08

^{vii} Project 211 is a Chinese government endeavour aimed at strengthening about 100 institutions of higher education and key disciplinary areas as a national priority for the 21st century. Project 211 is an important program launched by the Ministry of Education in 1993 during the 9th Five - Year Plan.

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