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## Shifting discourses of equality and equity of basic education: an analysis of national policy documents in China

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### ABSTRACT

As the world's second-largest economy, China faces great challenges in educational equality and equity. This article examines the evolution of discourses surrounding educational equality by focusing on how Chinese central governments from the 1980s to the 2010s have formulated this issue. Through key national policy documents and drawing upon Espinoza's equality–equity model, we analyse the sociopolitical context of changes in China's educational discourse and come to the conclusions that in the 1980s, shifting the government's agenda to economic reforms, national poverty subsumed the issue of educational equality. In the 1990s, according to the inherited political rationale, the government treated educational inequality as a 'necessary process' of Chinese socialist market economy. Since the 2000s, equality and equity has become an 'urgent issue' as the government's agenda has shifted focus to stabilizing the nation's economy and society. We propose labelling these three stages of equality–equity discursive departure in the 1980s, continuity and rupture in the 1990s, and prioritization since the 2000s.

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Chinese basic education; discursive shift; educational equality; educational equity; critical discourse analysis; official discourse

### Introduction

New forms of the governance of education are grounded in an international discursive knowledge that permeates the dialogues of education from global to local levels (Little, 2000; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Verger, 2014). In this context, the globally circulating ideas of educational equality have gradually taken root in Chinese political discussion. Over the past four decades, China, as one of the world's largest economies, has striven for and succeeded in increasing its people's literacy rate by ensuring compulsory education for all. The World Bank (2009) assessment of Chinese poverty and inequality reports that the estimated population living in poverty dropped over half a billion from 1981 to 2004; this accounts for the total decline in the population living in poverty across all developing countries in the same period. Beginning in 2006, Chinese compulsory education became free of charge to all<sup>1</sup> nationwide and is considered a significant turning point in promoting educational equality in China (Cheng, 2009; Gustafsson, Shi, & Sicular, 2008; Yang, Huang, & Liu, 2014; Zhang & Kanbur, 2005). However, this report (World Bank, 2009) also points out that income inequality has become severe, and that the tasks of ensuring educational equality remain a continuous challenge notwithstanding these efforts (Li, Sato, & Sicular, 2013).

Historically, definitions of equality and equity can be traced back to the writings of Aristotle and Plato

in the West (Cheng, 2009; Espinoza, 2007) and to Confucius in China (Cheng, 2009; Nuyen, 2001). Today, the ideas of equality and equity have developed into multifarious theoretical approaches attending to these concepts from different perspectives (e.g. Cheng, 2009; Espinoza, 2007; Lynch, 2000). Literature that deals with the issues of equality of education in the Chinese context is often empirical, takes the concept of inequality as given (Cheng, 2009; Song & Woo, 2008; Yang et al., 2014; Zhang & Kanbur, 2005) and contributes to the explanations of both the causes of and solutions for educational inequality (Bramall, 2009; Gustafsson et al., 2008; Lynch, 2000; Whyte, 2010; Zhao & Sheng, 2010). Policy analysis of equality and equity seems nevertheless far more complicated because of the political parameters that steer policies through their discursive and constitutive implications. In this vein, Fairclough (2010) argues that governments generate notions of social reforms by changing the articulations, terminologies or embodied new values in political discourses.

The terminology used to describe the phenomena related to educational equality in China embraces various concepts. Chinese official discourses have established sets of the corresponding language to convey their 'steadfast' political messages on what aspects of equality the state ensures. For instance, *pingděng* (equivalent to equality) means the sameness in the distribution of resources, such as equal rights to access and equal opportunities (e.g. Coleman, 1968; Jacob &

Holsinger, 2008; Samoff, 1996). *Gōngpíng* (equivalent to equity) means fairness, justice and impartiality in the distribution of education (e.g. Espinoza, 2007; Jacob & Holsinger, 2008). As our analyses later indicate, the placements of the aspects of *píngděng* or *gōngpíng* in the policy documents explain how problems embedded in political agendas are prioritized, and how in official discourse, a newly employed concept signifies a change in political agenda. In the early 2000s, the notion of *jūnhéng* (balance and equilibrium) appeared in educational documents soon after the state’s agenda shifted to emphasizing the reduction of regional disparities in education.

This article focuses on examining the changes of the Chinese state’s official discourse since the Reform and Opening-up policy in 1978 and, more specifically, on analysing how policy documents address the topics of educational equality–equity in association with the changed social and historical contexts. We adopt critical discourse analysis (CDA) (Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Taylor, 1997; Vavrus & Seghers, 2009) to analyse the characteristics and dispositions of official discourses concerning educational equality–equity, as well as their changes in relation to the model of equity–equality (Benadusi, 2002; Espinoza, 2007; Lynch, 2000), through elaboration of the genre changes in articulation, argumentation and identifying (Fairclough, 2003).

The article has seven sections. The following section discusses the model of equality–equity to provide an analysis of the theoretical starting point from which empirical analysis proceeds. After that, the research questions, empirical data and the method of the CDA are presented, which are followed by the empirical analysis as divided into three sections. The article ends with the conclusion section.

### Model of equality–equity embedded in three theoretical classifications

In order to locate the controversies and differences emphasized in theoretical discussions of equality and equity, Espinoza (2007) proposes a meta-analytical

model of equity–equality. His model attempts to provide an overarching view of the various dimensions and perspectives suggested by different theoretical approaches. This article’s nomenclature – equality–equity – reverses the order of Espinoza’s original equity–equality to reflect the current Chinese context in which equality is prioritized. We further elaborate this model by introducing three theoretical underpinnings based on contributions from Benadusi (2002) and Lynch (2000): egalitarianism, structural-functionalism and critical theory.

As Table 1 shows, in the educational process (resources, access, attainment and output), equality and equity each entail three dimensions that have contributed to the understanding of the objective of this article. Equality encompasses *equality of opportunity*, *equality for all* and *equality for the average across social groups* and equity concerns three dimensions on the personal level: *for equal needs*, *for equal potential* and *for equal achievement*. Each cell conveys the main characteristics located in the specific classification and dimension.

Espinoza’s equality–equity model centres less on the different premises that underpin various theoretical approaches to educational equality and equity and more on the multifacetedness of the theorizations and implications of educational equality and equity. The multifacetedness is due not only to divergent and epistemological stances but also to the applicability of idea into practice. For instance, in the paradigm of egalitarianism (Rawls, 1999; Roemer & Trannoy, 2015), ‘equality of opportunity’ would guarantee the same opportunity for everyone. To structural-functionalists, it would mean reallocating resources to promote the accessibility of education for the disadvantaged and to prevent trans-generational inequality. However, critical theorists would question the possibility of positive discrimination through the application of differentiated policies. With regard to equity, egalitarians think the government should provide equal minimum assurance to support individuals’ needs, potential and academic achievement.

Table 1. Model of equality–equity in the education process.

Theoretical classifications			Epistemological stances		
			Egalitarian	Structural-functionalism	Critical theorists
Process & Dimensions					
Educational process (resources, access, attainment and output)	<b>Equality</b>	Of opportunity For all For groups	Universalisation  Classless	Individualized Merit principle Proportional representation	Social capital Privileged culture Cultural equalization
	<b>Equity</b>	Needs Potential Achievement	Minimum assurance	Deterministic  Meritocratic interpretation	Reasonable classification definition Cultural capital Social constraints

This table is inspired by the work of Benadusi (2002), Espinoza (2007) and Lynch (2000). In the leftmost column, Process & Dimensions, we present the stages of the educational process including resources, access, attainment and output. The next column summarizes the concepts of equality (of opportunity, for all and for groups) and equity (needs, potential and achievement) (Espinoza, 2007). The issues of education equality and equity are present in all stages of the educational process. The columns on the right comprise three theoretical classifications (egalitarian, structural-functionalism and critical theorists), which adopt different approaches to equality and equity.

However, structural-functionalists focus on the deterministic aspects of how individual endowments circumscribe needs, potential and achievement differently. Critical theorists otherwise consider equity at an individual level, in that their needs, potential and achievement are restrained by the hierarchical cultural apparatus that has predetermined the inequality of education.

The above-mentioned three theoretical approaches deviate with regard to how the principles of distribution of educational resources advance justice and fairness among groups or individuals (Carlson, 1983; Espinoza, 2007; Harvey & Klein, 1985; Secada, 1989). Understanding the various interpretations of equality in education in Western and Eastern cultures requires consideration of their philosophical and historical underpinnings. In democratic contexts, they share the same egalitarian premise, which is to treat all people equally (Lynch, 2000; Rawls, 1999). Ignoring this premise would be considered not only politically questionable but also ethically objectionable. Egalitarianism embraces the idea of providing education to everyone and the role of government in ensuring such a provision. Although Confucianism is associated with strengthening the hierarchy in Chinese society, it also contains the elementary idea of egalitarianism that people are born equal and possess an equal right to study regardless of social status (Cheng, 2009; Nuyen, 2001). But, due to the significant impact of radical political activities during Mao Zedong's era in the 1950s and 60s, the philosophical justification underlying how equality in education was understood and reframed in the Chinese political context is often referred to as 'radical egalitarianism' (*píng jūn zhǔ yì*), that is, to radically diminish any differences in resource distributions and commit to eliminating social classes (Benadusi, 2002; Arnove, 1984; Hannum, 1999; Lynch, 2000). After Mao's era, this notion of radical egalitarianism as well as corresponding educational policies were dismissed. The opening-up of the country and the idea of Four Modernizations by Deng Xiaoping promoted the economic development of the education sector. As we later point out in our analysis, the views embedded in structural-functionalism that took inequality as a necessary given in society and as a natural outcome of social stratification and division of power distributions started in the late 1970s and were gradually adopted by the official discourse (Benadusi, 2002; Espinoza, 2007; Green, 1989).

In the structural-functionalist approach to equality, schools as part of social systems evolve in hierarchical and unequal contexts. Education is considered to have an equalizing function in unequal social systems (Cheng, 2009). However, critical theorists attend to the problematization of inequality within the educational system as being subject to the social system for self-reproduction.

This strand of theory looks particularly at how inequality between different social strata and gender is reproduced (Benadusi, 2002; Bourdieu, 1977; Lynch, 2000). As we will later indicate in our analysis, the official discourse in the 2000s recognized that the socio-economic paths had led to profound inequalities in education in China. Some of the measures taken in recent years to avoid deepening inequalities in China's education policy, such as completely free compulsory education and underlining regional equilibrium, reflect the views that are elementary in critical theory and thus depart from structural-functionalist views.

Finally, we wish to elaborate on some notions concerning Espinoza's framework (2007) and the approach of this article. The equality–equity model does not intend to solve the conflicts embedded within these sociological approaches. On the contrary, this model calls upon increasing critical reflections on the taken-for-granted concepts that have multifaceted indications and implications in policy analysis. Thus, we do not intend to use this model to explain the causes of inequality or inequity in Chinese basic education. Instead, we seek to use this model as a meta-diagram to establish dispositions of contextualized concepts with critical but vigilant cultural awareness and discursive consciousness.

### Research questions, empirical data and critical discourse analysis

Intending to explore the political discourses concerning Chinese basic education and their changes overtime, this article seeks to determine how the associated political documents address the topic of educational equality and equity from the 1980 through 2017. We are interested in discovering not only what has changed but what has remained the same over the past four decades, and we pay special attention to the social-historical contexts of these discursive changes.

To start, we collected the 5-year educational plans, blueprint documents, and laws ( $N = 12$ ) (See Appendix 1) ratified by the National People's Congress and released by the Ministry of Education (MOE), which are the two highest bureaucracies producing national policy documents for education. These documents are essential sources for understanding Chinese official state discourses, for they document the state's most important decisions on major educational topics. However, we feel the need to briefly clarify this selection of documents. We included two law documents – the *Law of Compulsory Education 1986* and the amended *Law of Compulsory Education 2006* – because these documents are both official and legislative, which would provide the highest authorized explanations of the fundamental principles of the distribution of

educational resources. The 5-year plan and blueprint documents are the Chinese state's tradition of setting up goals and targets through educational plans before acting accordingly. These are not laws but have the governing power of redirecting the trajectory of educational reforms, and they also reframe how follow-up action plans and implementation plans are subsequently made and implemented. The 10<sup>th</sup> *Five-year Educational Plan* is the first plan centred entirely on education and framed independently from previous national 5-year plans focusing on social and economic issues – plans in which educational issues were contained but were not the sole focus. We collected all subsequent educational plans except for the twelfth because, in the same year, the MOE released another specific document regarding education equality – the *State Council's Opinions on Deepening the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education*. Considering it was the first specified document on such an issue, we included it instead.

The empirical analysis draws on Norman Fairclough's (1992, 1993, 2003) CDA to analyse discursive shifts of official state discourse. Fairclough (1992, 2003) sees discourse as one form of social practice that is interdiscursively connected to other social practices. Political discourses produced by authorities often carry the signatures of the institution's culture and ideology. Therefore, discourse dialectically constructs social practices. Stephen Ball (2015) illustrates this constitutive effect by explaining that 'policies as discursive strategies – sets of texts, events, artefacts, and practices, speak to wider social processes of schooling, such as the production of "the student", the "purpose of schooling", and the construction of "the teacher"' (p. 3). Constitutive effects are thus created through the language defining socially acceptable behaviour. The 'discursive changes in relation to social and cultural changes' (Fairclough, 1992, p. 96), meaning that policy's discursive aspects concern a transformative social context (Taylor, 2004). Policy texts are considered chains of genre with political styles of articulating social issues into official state discourse. They are shaped by specific political moments and follow political rules and conventions in format (Fairclough, 2003; Kress, 1990). Discursive changes are usually accompanied by genre changes, which manifest themselves in texturing, relating and identifying (Fairclough, 2003; Taylor, 2004).

The empirical analysis started with an exhaustive reading of all documents to comprehend their content and overall characteristics. During this reading, we highlighted the content related to equality or equity with colour markers. Then, we scrutinized the documents again using different keywords, as informed by the literature, to complete the extraction of all relevant content in order to identify the converted terminologies, wordings and argumentations, and to indicate changed social conditions (Fairclough, 2010). We further examined the

extracts' texturing (Fairclough, 2010; Vavrus & Seghers, 2009) in contrast with the equality–equity model and focalized our research on the macro-level interdiscursive analysis as a way of understanding how once-hegemonic discourse became marginalized and how what was once preferred became unpreferred.

Due to space constraints, not all extracts are displayed in this article. Thus, we illustrate the textural analysis with examples in Tables 1, 2, and 3, alongside the interdiscursive analysis. However, we fully recognize the limits of the methods and materials. This article does not intend to evaluate the policy effects (Ball, 2015), or to what extent the inequality has been solved. Instead, we focus on the 'representations of how things are and have been, as well as representations of how things might or have to be' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 260).

### Official discourse departs from the radical egalitarian premise in the 1980s

Since the 1980s, China has been opening up to the outside world and promoting the economy through partnerships with the West. The official language also starts departing from the radical egalitarian premise – a stance upheld by the communist left to radically eliminate any social division and classes. This departure is manifested in three documents: *Guidelines 1993*, *Action Plan 1998* and the 10<sup>th</sup> *Five-year Plan 2001* (see Table 2), all released during the Deng Xiaoping administration.<sup>2</sup> They employ strong and straightforward language to criticize the 'class struggle' as wrong because it neglected the economy and failed to bring prosperity and stability to China. They also announce the new leadership's disapproval of leftist policies, such as establishing peasants' and workers' schools in the name of educational egalitarianism and depreciating the traditional school system. Instead, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, a new official language redefines education as an effort that should 'orient towards modernization, the world, and the future' (CCCPC, 1985, p. 1). These three orientations herald changes in the state's intention of employing the opening-up policy and introducing market-oriented reforms in the domain of education.

In order to find the balance between China as a socialist state and as a state with a market-oriented economy, the new political language carefully tones down the ideological perspective of the market and accentuates the urgency and necessity of borrowing market tools to develop the socialist economy. In 1987, the 13<sup>th</sup> National Congress of the Communist Party of China decides that China as a socialist state in the primary underdeveloped stage has to move away from the principle of equality and into the principle of the efficiency of developing the economy and reducing poverty (Fan, 2006). In this way, educational inequality is officially translated as a given outcome of poverty. It

**Table 2.** Examples of extract for the 1980s.

Title of the document	Examples of extract	Aspects of equality-equity
Decision 1980 (State Council, 1980)	The central government requires that these relatively well-developed regions ... should achieve universalisation of primary education before 1985...As for a very small number of economically particularly poor and problematic regions, the timeline can be extended... However, to a large country such as China with a large population and underdeveloped economy, the universalisation of primary education cannot be managed entirely by the state ... Must also encourage the masses to raise funds for running schools... ...universalizing the primary schools are not...entirely held responsible by the state ( <i>guójiā</i> )...	Universalisation Access to primary schools Differentiated policies Decentralisation
Decision 1985 (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC), 1985)	Since the late 1950s, as the focus of the entire party's work has not been shifted to economic construction due to the influence of the 'leftist' ideology of 'class struggle', education has not been given an important place for a long time and has been impacted frequently by leftist political campaigns. ...the national fiscal capacity to invest in education is restrained by the level of the country's economy ... ... the responsibility for basic education is in the country, the society, and the family... ...encourages some regions to develop first, then developed areas help backward areas later, and then achieve joint progressing [in education] ...	Universalisation Access to secondary schools Decentralisation
Compulsory Law 1986 (National People's Congress, 1986)	Article 2. The state implements nine-year compulsory education. The provinces, cities, autonomous regions and municipalities directly under the Central Government shall determine the steps for implementing compulsory education according to the local level of economic and cultural development. Article 5. Children who have reached the age of six years, regardless of gender, ethnicity, shall be admitted to a school for a specified number of years of compulsory education.	An obligation for children at the educated age

**Table 3.** Examples of extract for the 1990s.

Title of the document	Examples of extract	Aspects of equality-equity
Guidelines 1993 (State Council, 1993)	The regional plan of development is based on the actual unbalanced economic and cultural conditions from each region ... ... in order to achieve the above objectives, [we] shall deepen the education reform... improve the quality of education, pay attention to the efficiency of running schools, carrying out area planning and strengthen social participation...	Differentiated policy Access/equality Universalisation
Action Plan 1998 (Ministry of Education, 1998)	The <i>Two-Basics</i> is entering into the most crucial stage ... [it] is the 'priority among priorities' of education in our country. During the tenth five-year plan, [we will] continue to carry out the national project in the poverty-stricken areas, with emphasis on the work on the mountainous, the pastoral, and the border areas. ... ...optimizing the teaching staff in primary and secondary schools and improve the efficiency of running schools by 2000...	Recourse and Access Equality for the average across social groups Special support projects to the poor
10 <sup>th</sup> Five-year Plan 2001 (Ministry of Education, 2001)	...adhere to the fairness and impartiality of socialist education... ...ensure investment of compulsory education in rural areas. The central and provincial people's governments must increase support for compulsory education in poor areas and ethnic minority areas through transfer payments... ... National Poor Areas Compulsory Education Project... ... Western Education Development Project... ... to further improve policies and systems for subsidising impoverished students with the main content of subsidised loans...	Equity Attainment Access/equality of opportunity Equal right

is promised that the state would prioritize equality over efficiency again when China reaches the well-off stage (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CCCPC), 1985). To align the economic reforms that would develop cities and modernize the country's economy, the state also decides to shift the 'national focus' (Wu, 2013, p. 215) of developing education from rural areas to urban areas. This change of emphasis forms a steep contrast to Mao's egalitarian strategy of focusing on rural areas to reduce the inequality gap (Townsend, 1977). Consequently, education starts to turn into a tool for serving the economy by educating enough qualified workers and talents to support economic development, thus causing educational discourses to be subject to economic discourses. The Chinese primary stage of socialism legitimizes the prioritization of developing

the economy through the idea of 'expediency'. This political genre addresses poverty as the cause of inequality and economic development as a solution. It argues that the low level of Chinese basic education is restrained by an undeveloped economy and that poverty is the reason that the central state has limited fiscal capacity to provide enough 'supply' for compulsory education (e.g. *Decision 1985*).

The departure from egalitarianism is also embodied in the changes in the role of the state. The decentralization of the educational administrative authority transfers the fiscal responsibility to the city/county level of government, thus switching the role of responsibility for basic education. In this way, the local-level governments are required to configure themselves as the main provider assuring and financing the development of

compulsory education, while the central government acts as their partner and shares the responsibility of attending to the most impoverished and problematic areas (see Table 2). In order to ease the financial pressure felt by local governments, the state also allows local actors (e.g. governments and schools) to raise private funds and to surcharge students with educational fees. In this way, the financial burden is further transferred to society. This is criticized by many scholars (Knight, 2013; Tsang, 1994, 1996; West & Wong, 1995; Zhang & Kanbur, 2005), for liberal educational policies could worsen equality of opportunity and magnify the privileges of social and cultural capital in the educational process. It is indeed a clear departure from egalitarian policies, but our empirical analysis finds that policy documents delicately avoid terms, such as market, marketization, or educational privatization. Instead, they use 'system reforms' (*tǐzhì gǎigé*) to indicate that the educational policies differ significantly from those conducted during Mao's era. Furthermore, as we mentioned, funds from individuals, third parties and companies are all articulated into 'public funds'.

Since inequality is interpreted as the same problem as poverty, our empirical analysis shows that terms related to educational equality–equity are not detectable, nor are other phrases signifying aspects of equality–equity used directly. The political articulation considers attending school to be more of an obligatory and compulsive duty rather than a bestowed right (e.g. *Law of Compulsory Education 1986*). The disparities that prevailed at local economic levels, the fiscal capacities and the levels of educational development are conceived as given conditions that steered educational policies. Accompanied changes in argumentation are meant to dismiss the idea of sameness upheld by the radical egalitarian premise. That is, the affluent provinces mostly located on the Eastern coast are encouraged to universalize compulsory education more quickly than the disadvantaged provinces in the Western part of China (e.g. *Decision 1985*).

Positioning this political genre within the model of equality–equity, we can see that Chinese political discourses moved from a radical egalitarian premise towards the structural-functionalist approach of taking inequality as a 'necessary given in society' (Espinoza, 2007). Here, the given contexts include economic, educational and cultural 'differences' that contribute to inequalities. The regional inequality is normalized as an obvious consequence of China's vast territorial size and economic discrepancies.

### Continuity and rupture of official discourse in 1990s

Upon reaching the 1990s, remarkable economic growth had enhanced the state's confidence in the choice of market-oriented reforms. Political discourses

regarding equality–equity associated economic wealth with marketization on the one hand and inherited the previous structural-functionalist stance of regarding inequality as a given on the other. The articulations manifested in the genre chain of three documents (see Table 3) use the same articulations of attributing inequality to the country's size, the shortages of schools, teachers and basic facilities, insufficient educational investment, and low economic development. In the same vein as in the previous stage, terminologies signifying aspects of equality–equity remain absent. As those are recognized as causes, the solution also remains the same – to develop the economy. The state continues to encourage rich areas to develop faster and to increase their international competitiveness, whereas the economically poor areas only receive state's financial and other types of assistance through governmental projects (e.g. *Guidelines 1993*).

Contrasting with the previous stage, political discourses have outspokenly interlinked education to marketization. The terminologies, such as school effectiveness (*bànxué xiàolǜ*), efficiency (*xiàoyì*), and privatization of the educational market, characterize the New Public Management. Economic terms and the logic of marketization are widely used in these documents (see Table 3). Teachers' evaluations are also changed to be performance-based, along with students' enrolments and evaluations. Encouraged by market-oriented policies, the expanding examination, ranking and selection of students levitate the educational market of shadow education and other training services. This trend gains momentum when it finds justifications from Confucian meritocracy. However, these are all ascribed to the 'necessary process' of the Chinese socialist market economy (*shèhuì zhǔyì shìchǎng jīngjì*) and discursively reifies that they still serve the socialist market economy.

The only exception is that policy articulation remains very cautious about the expression of educational privatization. However, they have allowed more room for non-governmental parties (e.g. private individuals and organizations) to run schools, which open the door to educational privatization. But, political discourses still deny happenings of educational privatization and deny using discursive rhetoric to veil those practices with evasive alternative expressions, such as 'education being managed by people' (*mínbàn jiàoyù*). The discursive ruptures also manifest themselves in the way that the state's role is problematized, that is, who should increase its responsibility for financing basic education (e.g. *10th Five-year Educational Plan 2001*).

New aspects and concepts emerge in this period – specifically, educational impartiality (*gōngzhèng xìng*) and students' equal rights to education (*píngděng shòu jiàoyùquán*) (MOE, 2001). These changes of genre deliver the message that, in responding to the global agenda

of promoting equal educational opportunity and equal rights (Han & Ye, 2017), the state is starting to attend to the systematic barriers that might contribute to the ‘inequality of opportunity’ as considered by Espinoza (2007). From this political genre, our analysis finds that the political will of the state puts more effort towards supporting impoverished individuals and groups from the aspect of access to school and school maintenance. At the access level, the state now focuses on increasing accessibility by first providing more opportunities through the programme of *Two-Basics*<sup>3</sup> and then reducing system barriers through reforming *hùkǒu*.<sup>4</sup> Regarding school maintenance, the state has created several special financial programmes to support the impoverished areas and students from impoverished families to prevent drop-out due to financial reasons; one such programme is the *Guójiā pínkùn dìqū yìwù jiàoyù gōngchéng* (*National Project of Promoting the Implementation of Compulsory Education in Poverty-stricken Areas*) (see Table 3). Regarding the duality of regulation, the state has started to reform the problem of access exclusion caused by *hùkǒu* (e.g. *10<sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan 2001*). We wish to note here that the concept of equality of groups from Espinoza’s (2007) stance speaks of the ascription level of ethics, social classes and genders (Benadusi, 2002).

In conclusion, the political discourse concerning the causes of and solutions for educational inequality holds hybrid stances. It employs the structural-functionalist stance to explain educational inequality as a necessary outcome while the national economy grows rapidly throughout the 1990s but, when prescribing solutions, it shifts to the egalitarianism stance to ensure the minimum assurance of regional equality. Although the global dialogue on equal educational rights is reflected to some extent, multifarious aspects in global dialogue, such as gender equality, are not acknowledged in the Chinese political context at this stage.

### Official discourses prioritize equality and equity since the 2000s

From the 2000s onward, political discourses show fundamental changes in the choices of terminology, ways of articulations, and content of topics. Different from the previous style in the 1980s or 1990s, the articulation becomes straightforward. The terms *equality* and *equity* are directly employed to convey the dialogue of how to solve the inequalities in Chinese basic education. New notions and aspects are introduced. This political genre is particularly manifested in six policy documents (see Table 4) released by two administrations from 2004 to 2017, which show the official reconstruction of the formulations of educational equality and equity. Through the *11<sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan 2007*, the state literally calls upon controlling educational inequality

by stating that ‘the modernization of socialist country [...] presses for promoting education equity and improving the balanced development of education’ (p. 6). Later, in the preface to *Guidelines 2010–2020*, promoting educational equity is further promoted as ‘China’s basic principle’ (State Council, 2010, p. 5). It seems that China has come to such a discursive shifting point that the state is willing to discuss the inequality topic openly in China.

It is less surprising to see such changes in the official discourse of educational equality and equity when considering wider social aspects. Since the 2000s, China’s economic speed has started to slow, but social and educational inequality has reached a historically high level – a level that has been criticized and resented by many (Cheng, 2009; Fan, 2006; Law, 2007; Li et al., 2013). Facing the impacts of the global economic crisis and the possibility of a domestic economic hard-landing, stabilization becomes the central concern of the state. It is urgent for the Chinese state to comfort its people’s social anxiety by delivering strong political messages that people’s well-being is the reason for developing the economy, and that the state intends to keep its promises of bringing prosperity to China and well-off (*xiǎokāng*) statuses to Chinese people. In this respect, we found that the official state discourse starts to attend to social and educational inequality more attentively. As Fan (2006) also observed, the official discourse shift from ‘getting rich first to common prosperity’ as inequality increased (p. 709).

The Hu-Wen administration,<sup>5</sup> besides upholding the policy of the market economy, introduces its political vision of building a harmonious socialist society (*shèhuì zhūyì héxié shèhuì*), which is a social scenery that is ‘democratic and ruled by law, fair and just, trustworthy and fraternal, full of vitality, stable and orderly, and maintains harmony between man and nature’ (Chan, 2010, p. 821). Within this context, educational equity is articulated not only as one important element of such scenery (Chan, 2010; Fock & Wong, 2008), but also as an important indicator that reveals the development of citizenship education, life-long learning, joy of learning, fair student testing and the reduction of regional disparity. Equity is also associated with the national moralization and internationalization (State Council, 2010) embodied in the policy documents. This political genre shows an all-embracing discourse of educational equity as it relates to all the ongoing reforms in the educational domain.

However, positioning the official discourse of ‘equity’ in the model of equality and equity can be considered as a concept equivalent to that of the justice or fairness of access to school at an individual level (see Table 4). This is the state’s ultimate goal for the future. In contrast, the term ‘equality’ is preferred when the state articulates the concrete and operational goals to be



**Table 4.** Examples of extract for the 2000s.

Title of the document	Examples of extract	Aspects of equality-equity
Revitalization Plan 2004 (Ministry of Education, 2004)	The western region which needs more efforts to tackle their problems... ...to implement the Rural Boarding School Construction in rural areas... ...to improve school conditions and constructions in Western rural... ...by the end of 2007, students who are struggling with the family economy in the rural compulsory schools will be able to enjoy the free of charge education, subsidy for school boarding expense and free textbooks. The ultimate task is to prevent drop-out of student because of financial difficulties...	Access to schools Equal quality schools Maintenance of schools Special support projects to the poor
Compulsory Law 2006 (National People's Congress, 2006)	Article 4 All children and teenagers of the right age ... regardless of gender, ethnicity, family property status, religious beliefs, etc., have an equal right to receive compulsory education... Article 6 The State Council and local people's governments...shall rationally allocate educational resources, promote the balanced development of compulsory education...in rural areas and ethnic minority areas to ensure the economic hardships of families. Disabled children and teenagers receive compulsory education. Article 12 Local people's governments at all levels shall guarantee school-age children and adolescents to enrol in schools nearby where their <i>hùkǒu</i> are registered.	Equal right <i>Jūnhéng</i> Eliminating system barriers Equal access Special support to the poor
11th Five-year Plan 2007 (State Council, 2007)	...further the project of improving the <i>weak schools</i> and make each school into a good school which has similar foundations, conditions, expenditure and investment, as well as the principals' and teachers... Let the Eastern regions help the villages in the Western region. Let the cities help rural schools and strive to narrow the gap between regions and between urban and rural areas...	<i>Jūnhéng</i> Quality
Guidelines 2010–2020 (State Council, 2010)	The key to educational equity is equal opportunity, and the basic requirement is to guarantee the people's right to education. The critical task is to promote the balanced development of education and support the disadvantaged groups, and the fundamental strategy is to redistribute educational resources in favour of remote and poor areas and ethnic minority regions, in order to bridge the gap. Education equity is the government's responsibility, and the whole society should jointly promote educational equity.	Access Equal right <i>Jūnhéng</i> Favour the disadvantaged Equity
Opinions 2012 (State Council, 2012)	... actively promote the standardisation construction of compulsory education schools through balancing and rationalising the allocation of resources such as teachers, equipment, books, school buildings, etc. ... promote the process of sharing quality educational resource... ... balanced the allocation of school resources... ... rationalise the allocation of teacher resources...	Same quality <i>Jūnhéng</i>
13th Five-year Plan 2017	...perfect fair system ( <i>gōngpíng</i> ) of education... ...preliminarily achieving a balanced development of compulsory education within the county (city) area... ...promote the standardisation of compulsory education schools. ...balanced and rational allocation of teacher resources... ...multiple ways to solve the problem of school selection reform...	Equity <i>Jūnhéng</i> Anti-selection/access

achieved at the present, despite these two often being used interchangeably. The official discourse of equality is constrained mainly in the dimension of equality of opportunity. As Table 4 shows, aspects (Espinoza, 2007) addressing the equality of opportunities, such as equality in access, resource and achievements, and eliminating social and system barriers are widely discussed in those documents (e.g. the *Guidelines 2010–2020* and the *13th Five-year Educational Plan*). The state especially highlights the solutions to exclusiveness caused by the deprivation of study rights of those who study in a place other than where his or her residence permission is registered (known as the *hùkǒu* system) and the regional unbalanced development (*bùjūnhéng*). These two topics will briefly be discussed next.

To show the state's determination to reform *hùkǒu*, several policies (e.g. the *Law of Compulsory Education 2006*, the *11<sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan 2007*, the *Guidelines 2010–2020* and the *Opinions 2012*) have consistently reiterated that *hùkǒu* should be reformed to enable the children of migrant workers to access public schools. Prescriptions include forbidding enrolment tests in the basic education stage, allocating more

study places in urban public schools to students with rural residence permission (*hùkǒu*) without paying an extra fee, and allowing them to attend graduation tests in the school where they study, with the exception of *College Entrance Exams* (*gāokǎo*), as students need to take that exam in the place where their residence permission is registered.

Regional unbalanced development, as concluded by Cheng (2009), manifests as the 'significant gaps [...] in educational development between the eastern, central, and western regions' in terms of the richness in educational resources (p. 94). Several policies have been stipulated in this regard (e.g. the *Law of Compulsory Education 2006*, the *11th Five-year Educational Plan 2007*, the *Guidelines 2010–2020*, and *13th Five-year Educational Plan 2017*). Through the *Education Revitalization Plan 2003*, the state has outlined a political vision of the educational *jūnhéng* within which a school's quality is on the same level and is evenly developed across China. To achieve educational *jūnhéng*, it is not just about the quantitative provision of *access* to school but also the assurance of access to the same quality of education. The important implication of the concept of *jūnhéng* is

that it introduces a new dimension of educational quality into the discourse of equality and equity.

Looking into the government's plans for achieving educational *jūnhéng* in the Xi-Li administration,<sup>6</sup> the tasks are divided into three steps: achieve the sameness of school quality within districts at the micro-level, then in all cities within the province-middle level, and finally in all regions between Eastern, Central and Western China (State Council, 2010, 2017). The best evidence justifying this conclusion comes partly from the language used in describing these steps. In the *Guidelines 2010–2020*, the importance and urgency of these steps descends as the verb changes from 'effectively narrow down', with regard to the goal of reducing district disparity, to 'quicken' the work, with regard to reducing the urban–rural disparity, and finally to 'try hard', with regard to narrowing the disparity between the Eastern, Central and Western regions. 'Try' is the weakest term because it indicates an attempted and negotiable action.

Our analysis shows that at this point in time, official discourses started to use ideas that contain elements similar to a critical theoretical approach towards equality and equity. This political genre expresses views of inequality that resemble what Espinoza (2007) describes as a 'social ill that required treatment' (p. 346). A 'social ill' is considered a flaw in the educational system, including selections, evaluations and financial distributions, therefore, the state's efforts are to attend to those flaws to create better educational systems. The *13th Five-year Educational Plan 2017* ushers in the critical theorist concept of preventing trans-generational inequality in the educational process, which meets one of the reform objectives that education stop creating new inequalities. In sum, it seems that ideas that are characteristic of the egalitarian and structural-functionalist approaches occupy a major role in the political logic, but some elements from critical theory start to take root as well.

## Conclusion

Our analysis has shown the significant differences in how official discourses have addressed educational equality–equity within the context of changing economic and political environments over the past four decades. The discursive shifts manifest through changes in terminologies, political rationales and shifts between the three epistemological stances of egalitarianism, structural-functionalism and critical theory. In the 1980s, when modernization policies inclined the country towards a market-oriented economy, vocabulary regarding topics of equity and equality is deliberately avoided; consequently, educational policies are undertaken on the assumption of inequality as a normal phenomenon rather than as a problem. In the 1990s, political discourse continued using the same formulations and rationales. We found a belief in inequality as an unavoidable reality to be the prevailing political

stance in the 1990s. For instance, the central administration clung onto the justification of the existence of complex and intractable social conditions, such as the country's tremendous size, as hindrances to the promotion of educational equality across the country.

But our analysis shows that this assumption reverses in the 2000s when inequality is considered a problem – specifically, the 'social ill'. Corresponding policies intend to fix flaws in the educational systems that cause educational inequality. Not only are equality and equity promoted to the top of the political agenda, but so are other aspects and concepts referred to as 'joined goals' with sequential orders. Coinciding with Samoff's (1996) predictive remarks regarding the order of planning equity and equality, China aims to achieve educational *jūnhéng* first, that is the regional unbalanced development, equality next and equity last (State Council, 2010, 2012). Despite the multifacetedness of both concepts, the official discourse currently centres mainly on the scale of equality and equity of 'opportunity', which, in contrast with the equality–equity model, ascribes mainly to the dimension of access to quality education. In the 2010s, a locally contextualized concept of *jūnhéng* emerged from the political discourse, replacing equity and equality as the main topic of discussion. At this point, along with the shift of notions, the state's political agenda shifts to the 'official problem' of regional disparities and to the phases of the process for solving such a problem.

We have located the dispositions of Chinese discourses through CDA using a meta-analysis model of equality–equity in which aspects and epistemological stances of the official discourses are at the root. Our most important findings are that the official discourse linked with the themes of equality and equity is context-dependence. We consider context-dependence to be one of the main characteristics in the political genre of articulation when the state addresses the aspects concerning educational equality or equity without employing the established terminologies in the Western context. As our analysis showed, in the 1980s and the 1990s, vocabulary signifying aspects of educational equality–equity are omitted; instead, official discourse speaks of their efforts to popularize compulsory education, that is, the work of promoting *equal access* of education (Espinoza, 2007). In the 1990s, many policy measures were targeted at solving the problems related to 'access', 'resources' and 'attainment' of education, but these measures employed different vocabularies and presentations that reflected the political rhetoric of the time.

A shift in discourse appears in the 2000s when the state starts to employ direct vocabulary to address equality and equity and is willing to discuss these topics publicly. Our analysis shows that the idea of context-dependent discourse could be used to explain this shift as the official discourse seems to avoid fixed conceptualizations. This implies that even when direct vocabulary (e.g. equal

opportunity) is employed, the shared meanings of equality and equity in official language remain fluid and elastic and can thus be changed according to shifting interests at the state level. As our analysis indicates, in the 2000s the official discourse employs terms of equality and equity to refer to reforms of *hùkǒu* (the residence permission system), and to attending to individual needs, student well-being and happiness. But, in the 2010s, the meaning of equality came to be associated more with *jūnhéng* (assuring regional balanced development).

This article has focused on the interpretation of official state discourses to unfold how topics related to educational equality–equity are continuously defined and redefined by the state. The representations of what is to be highlighted or avoided articulate the nature of political documents as exercises of power to achieve state agendas (Codd, 1988). This article also shows it is important to be aware of the fluidity of official discourse because policies contained in that discourse not only represent what to speak or not speak about (Ball, 2015) but are also subject to the political will of redefining what is and can be said.

## Notes

1. Compulsory education did not charge tuition fees, but there were some other fees and expenses charged by schools. Some researchers (Cheng, 2009) have pointed out that this increased the financial burden for students from low-income families. This became heavier burden when abuse of miscellaneous collected from families became common happens (Law, 2007).
2. Deng Xiaoping was the de facto leader of China from 1978 to 1992. One of his main political legacies is the Reform and Opening-up policy.
3. Two-Basics are the abbreviation of two basic goals. The first goal is to implement a 9-year period of compulsory education and the second is to eliminate illiteracy in China.
4. A residential registration system initially designed to manage populations (Cheng & Selden, 1994). Chinese public schools used to recruit students who have a local *hùkǒu*, while those without are either excluded (Cheng & Selden, 1994) or accepted with a high sponsorship fee. Simply put, the distribution of educational access is decided by *hùkǒu*. Wealthy families could buy their kids opportunities (e.g. city *hùkǒu*), but low-income families' choices are limited except to expect their kid to work harder to pass the standardized exam.
5. The Hu-Wen administration refers to the third generation of the central leadership in China, where Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao were the former president and premier, respectively, from 2002 to 2012.
6. The current central leadership is commonly referred to as the Xi-Li administration, where Xi Jinping is the current president and Li Keqiang is the premier.

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## Appendix 1. Document Sources of CDA

Year	Documents/Shorthand	Released during governments
1980	Decision of the CPCCC and the State council on Popularizing Primary Schools/ <i>Decision 1980</i>	Deng Administration (1978–1992)
1985	Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure/ <i>Decision 1985</i>	
1986	Law of Compulsory Education/ <i>Law of Compulsory Education 1986</i>	
1993	The Guidelines for China's Education Reform and Development/ <i>Guidelines 1993</i>	Jiang-Li-Zhu Administration (1992–2002)
1998	Action Plan to Vitalize Education into the 21 <sup>st</sup> Century/ <i>Action Plan 1998</i>	
2001	Outline of the 10 <sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan for 21 <sup>st</sup> Century/ <i>10<sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan 2001</i>	
2004	2003–2007 Education Revitalization Plan/ <i>Revitalization Plan 2003–2007</i>	Hu-Wen Administration (2002–2012)
2006	Amended Law on Compulsory Education/ <i>Amended Law of Compulsory Education 2006</i>	
2007	Outline of the 11 <sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan/ <i>11<sup>th</sup> Five-year Educational Plan 2007</i>	
2010	Guidelines for Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010–2020)/ <i>Guidelines 2010–2020</i>	
2012	State Council's Opinions on Deepening the Balanced Development of Compulsory Education/ <i>Opinions 2012</i>	Xi-Li Administration (11.2012- present)
2017	Outlines of the 13th Five-year Educational Plan/ <i>13th Five-year Educational Plan 2017</i>	

All policy documents were downloaded from official websites (the State Council and the Ministry of Education) and were translated by the authors of this article from Chinese to English. The translation was oriented to maintain the original taste of the official language used in these documents.