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**Headmasters Become Noblemen: Mainland Chinese Teachers' Perspectives
on Changes in Education under the Socialist Market Economy**
**Les directeurs d'école deviennent nobles: les perspectives de professeurs de
la Chine continentale face aux changements éducatifs sous l'ère de
l'économie de marché**

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Abstract

In this article I report findings of research into the lives and work of Mainland Chinese teachers of English in a broader context characterized by market economic reform. I draw on transcriptions of group interviews to describe and discuss teachers' lives and work, and forward a critical analysis that posits a connection between teachers' accounts and the re-structuring of social relations in post-Mao China. The article details one of several themes treated in the study, specifically the broad category of *effects of educational reform*. I suggest that the compliance and resistance apparent in these accounts reveals Chinese teachers to be neither cultural dopes nor harbingers of some newly emerging democratic society.

Résumé

Dans cet article, je fais le compte rendu des résultats d'une recherche concernant la vie et le travail de professeurs d'anglais langue étrangère en Chine continentale, un pays caractérisé par des réformes économiques de marché. Je mets l'accent sur les transcriptions d'entrevues de groupe afin de décrire et de discuter la vie et le travail de ces professeurs. La discussion est suivie par une analyse critique qui marque une connexion entre la description des professeurs et les restructurations sociales de l'ère post-Mao. Cet article expose en détail plusieurs thèmes mais il analyse surtout toutes les différentes catégories qui marquent les effets de la réforme éducative. Je conclus enfin en expliquant que les acceptations et les résistances des professeurs chinois envers cette réforme ne représentent ni des contrôles culturels, ni des indicateurs d'une société démocratique émergente.

Introduction

To say that the past thirty years have brought a radical reconfiguration of China's political and social-economic life is to cite in a truism. So too is the act of ascribing causal significance to something called "reform." In light of China's now more than one hundred years of various modes of revolution and "reform"—from the Republican era to the Communist Revolution, not to mention the various significant changes of direction that characterized the latter, to label all changes post-Mao a distinct "reform era" perhaps serves only to differentiate its decidedly anti-radical, socially regressive character from the turbulent times that immediately preceded it (Hart-Landsberg & Burkett, 2007). As a placeholder for a distinct and unified period, the term "reform era" faces other difficulties. Is it accurate, for example, to group together the rural-focused, freewheeling,

entrepreneurial and even nominally democratic 1980s with the urban-centred, tightly planned, corporatist and politically repressive post-Tiananmen China (Huang, 2008)? Is it any more precise for the Marxist left to see the present as a continuation of something called “Revolution” (see Anderson, 2010 for a cogent example)? If our concern is with the *longue durée*, certainly a focus on structure is important. However, if we want to better understand social change on its own terms, the necessary starting point is the details of the contemporary scene.

With this article, I aim to contribute to a more finely textured account of contemporary Mainland China by shedding light on one darkened corner of a vast and complex society. I present and analyze data generated in a qualitative study conducted in a single city located at the heart of the North China plain. How, I ask, have market-oriented educational reforms impacted the lives and work of junior middle school English teachers in this city? How do these teachers understand these impacts, and what opinions and beliefs lie at the core of their understandings? Finally, what do the symbolic forms they use to construct these opinions, beliefs, and understandings reveal about the relationship between authority and resistance in Chinese education?

China’s “Reform Era”

The question of educational reform is mainly one concerning the teachers. (Mao Zedong in CCP Kiangsu Provincial Committee Writing Group, 1973, p. 156)

Education should face [be oriented toward] modernization, face the world, face the future. (Inscription by Deng Xiaoping, October 1, 1983, at Beijing Jingshan School)

Post-Mao reform has proceeded as a repudiation of the egalitarian “excesses” of the period preceding 1977 and an acceptance of market-based “modernization” (Bian & Logan, 1996; Deng, 1987a, 1987b; Wang & Karl, 2004). This change has not led to formal rejection of Communist ideology or to wholesale popular rejection of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) itself, but to a renovation of the legitimating doctrines of both. Where post-Mao reform is justified as a return to a properly Marxist materialist mode of development (Deng, 1987a; Su, 1995), it is also undergirded by appeals to a locally adapted “Chinese” model and the development of a society “harmonious,” “balanced,” and “civilized” in all respects (Du, 2005; Dynon, 2008; Fan, 2006; Friedman, 2007; Han & Whyte, 2009; Rappai, 2006). In purely material terms, however, balance remains elusive. Indeed, Dengist reform and, in particular, the elevation of the socialist market economy as a central tenet of a revised CCP doctrine, has brought both material betterment and extreme inequalities in wealth, income, and opportunity (G. H. Chang, 2002; Nee, 1996; Nee & Matthews, 1996). Such disparities do signal a

reconfigured social structure, but they should not be taken to indicate a *sui generis* “New” China. Indeed, this new China retains many of the asymmetrical features each of the successive new Chinas that preceded it, reminding us that Mao’s dream of a prosperous egalitarian society was never completely realized (Bian, 2002; Kraus, 1981; Nee, 1989, 1991; Nee & Matthews, 1996; Whyte, 1975; Whyte, Vogel, & Parish, 1977).

The past three decades have seen enormous change in all areas of Chinese education, including policy, infrastructure, and curriculum. The compulsory education law (Ministry of Education, 2006), the basic education law (Ministry of Education, 1995), and, more recently, the “Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)” (Ministry of Education, 2010) portray a country determined to create a modern, regularized (Pepper, 2000) education system capable of providing universal, high quality education suited to the needs of a competitive, globalized world. High quality, naturally, suggests improvements in the material environment in which China’s students study. Evidence of improvements in physical infrastructure is not hard to find in urban settings. New school buildings are modern and technologically equipped, if crowded, though it should be noted that there is a significant gap between common schools and those developed as attractor or “key” schools. The pursuit of quality is also sought through curricular improvements. Most relevant to this article, a thoroughgoing revision of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum beginning in the late 1990’s and continuous tinkering with the language standards since has necessitated a massive in-service training enterprise that aims to update teachers’ knowledge and pedagogy, not to mention a booming publishing and extra-curricular language tutoring industry (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Huang, 2004; Ministry of Education, 2011; Parsons & Fenwick, 1999; Wu & Spilchuk, n.d.; Zhu & Zhu, 2001). The atmosphere surrounding the education of the nation’s children is one of intensification as teachers, administrators, and policy-makers work to both incite and cope with a traditional desire for education that appears to be increasing under the pressures of market-oriented competition (Kipnis, 2011).

Given the goals of Deng and his successors, it is not surprising that discussions of China’s educational reform tend to comprise evaluations of its effectiveness vis-à-vis market-based economic modernization (Adamson, 1995; Bray & Borevskaya, 2001; Chan & Mok, 2001; Fan, 2006). Also important is the question of schools’ success in instilling the values deemed necessary to replace the normative orders of Mao’s time, and the development of “civilized citizens” in accord with the “innumerable...[and] diverse...ways of acting, doing and being—from bodily functions to governing the people” prescribed and described

in post-Mao “civilization theory” (Dynon, 2008, p. 109). Critical scholars of education tend to link modernization and educational reforms with the emergence of inequality and a transformed class structure. Such commentators are concerned with how commodification and the now-dominant discourses of “civilization” and *suzhi jiaoyu* (“education for quality”) have shifted policy away from universal access and toward differential provision (see especially Kipnis, 2006, 2007; Woronov, 2003, 2008).

The rhetoric of China’s leadership over the years has been consistent in identifying teachers as primary subjects/objects of revolution (as in the statement from Mao above; see also Mao, 1939, 1958) and/or vilification/re-education/reform (mostly famously during the Cultural Revolution; see Mao, 1970). Still, describing the scale and vigour of present efforts to raise the quality of the nation’s teaching force is a daunting task. To do so would be to go beyond the narrow focus of this article, but the effort to reform teachers as a crucial element of an overarching program of educational reform helps to explain both the substantial literature dealing with questions of teachers’ shortcomings and (re)training, and the origins and shape of this research project. Beginning in 2002, I began a now ten-year-long involvement in China’s project of educational reform. As a teacher trainer and editor in a state-owned educational publishing house, I was hired as a “foreign expert” to plan and deliver in-service training for primary and middle school English teachers throughout the country. Later, my job description was broadened to include textbook writing as a member of a large editing team in several rounds of textbook revisions. Working in these capacities allowed me to observe educational reform at two critical junctures: first, at the point where the aims and principles of national curriculum are translated into classroom materials; and second, where these materials are put into practice in schools.

My dissatisfaction with commonly offered explanations for Chinese English teachers’ “failure” to rapidly adopt new curricula and associated teaching practices fuelled my desire to reassess common sense understandings of the lives and work of teachers in a time of near-total renovation of the school system. Standard arguments only partially account for and, indeed, most often fail to recognize the scope and vigour of teachers’ negative responses to reform. Three kinds of complaints against reform are most common. The first of these comprises researchers who ask questions along the lines of “What is structurally wrong with the Chinese education system that reform of English teaching is difficult?” Such research looks at problems with curricula (Huang, 2004), at issues surrounding the financing of education or the central government’s commitment to equitable and/or adequate funding (Chan & Mok, 2001; Cheng,

1994; Tsang, 1996) and, following from this, the impact of inadequate compensation on the social status of teachers (Guo, 2005; Lo, 1999). Scholars in the second grouping tend to ask, “What is wrong with Chinese teachers that they are not able to achieve the aims of reform?” Here, the improperly or poorly trained, “low quality” teacher figures prominently (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Guo, 2005; Guo & Pungur, 2008; Li, 1999; Shen, 1994; Wang, 1987). The third grouping comprises those who implicitly or directly question, “What is it about Chinese culture that makes the reform program difficult?” While such perspectives do not necessarily propose the casting off of all things “Chinese,” they nonetheless see Chinese “tradition” and “culture” as a drag on the pace on the reform (Chen, 2007; Paine, 1990; Wang & Cai 2007).

My goal in the present work is not to discount the insights provided by such research. Indeed, it would be naïve to suggest that systemic inefficiency, inadequate funding, poor training, and even cultural misalignment do not play a role in the present difficulties. I suggest, however, that these perspectives gain descriptive and explanatory purchase only *vis-à-vis* the question of how reform as presently imagined might be more effectively achieved. Not surprisingly, then, the voices of Chinese teachers themselves, except as an aggregate presence in survey research, is largely absent. They do not, in other words, challenge the normative precepts that form the core of educational reform, *i.e.*, modernization and nation building by whatever means necessary (see Deng 1987a). Constrained by this normative locus, much present research demeans expressions of resistance as petty complaining. Even the sympathetic among these researchers tend to focus on “failure,” especially the real and imagined failings of teachers. In doing so, they downplay or dismiss substantive problems that lie behind the everyday acts by which the process of reform in education is contested.

In what follows, I suggest that it is foolhardy to dismiss all negative responses as pig-headedness and backwardness, or, following manners more appropriate to academe, as culturally embedded barriers to otherwise desirable change. It seems to me unlikely that the entire corps of teachers in one of the world’s most respected educational traditions is entirely ignorant or culturally backward. Having said this, I do not propose to equate teachers’ resistance to the programmes of reform with wholesale rejection of change in all its manifestations. On the contrary, my research demonstrates that teachers, like many in Chinese society, see reform as necessary and tend to align themselves with the dominant perspective of forward progress through reform. Still, in expressing their opposition as they do, they provide a critical presence that offers a much-needed check on the designs of the powerful academic and bureaucratic elite.

The Study

The study was conducted in the city of Shijiazhuang in Hebei Province. Shijiazhuang is a city of moderate economic development and political influence on the national scene, and, thus, a not-prestigious but on the whole typical non-internationalized Chinese city. It is the capital of a province with a population of roughly seventy million and the largest of that province's eleven cities. By 2004, the city proper housed a relatively modest two million, but, as the centre of its own prefecture, it now governs more than nine million people. The city has changed rapidly in the past ten years, undergoing a massive urban renewal and renovation program beginning in 2008. Despite its somewhat shoddy reputation, Shijiazhuang is not unusually backward or impoverished.¹ Indeed, its civil and educational infrastructure has improved vastly under the market economy, and its residents enjoy a reasonably high standard of living. Its primary and middle schools operate in a highly competitive environment, forced to be better by admission policies that require Hebei students to score higher on college entrance examinations than their counterparts in the country's centres of higher education. In higher education, Shijiazhuang does provide a range of educational opportunities to its residents, but its post-secondary institutions are considered second-rate compared to the relatively few well-known and nationally supported comprehensive institutions located in cities like Beijing, Shanghai, and Xi'an. For outsiders and locals alike, and most certainly for Shijiazhuang's most aggressively upwardly mobile, true urbanity and opportunity exist elsewhere, in Beijing, Shanghai, or overseas.

I recruited five junior middle school English teachers to take part in this research. The names used below—Wang Dian, Lao Le, Gao Su, Xiao Yan, and Lao Ping—are pseudonyms. These teachers taught in a variety of middle schools, all government owned and operated, none of particularly high standing in the city. The oldest had nearly thirty years of teaching experience and the youngest had ten. At least one was recognized by the others as an excellent teacher; she had been acknowledged on several occasions by city and provincial authorities as a model teacher. Four of the five were regularly enlisted to train other teachers and to give model lessons at the city, provincial, and even national levels. I met informally with each of them on a number of occasions, and we met as a group on five occasions, four in the home of one of the teachers and once in mine. The host provided tea and snacks, thus establishing an atmosphere in which unstructured and wide-ranging discussions of experiences with reform over the course of the past three decades proceeded reasonably unencumbered. The group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and coded for emergent themes. For the purposes of this article, I focus on only one of these themes, that of teachers'

opinions, beliefs, and understandings in and around the topic of *effects of educational reform*.

In order to present as much raw data as possible and to convey a sense of teachers' self-understandings, I present extensive excerpts from transcripts of our conversations. These understandings are supplemented with discussion and commentary that draws attention to particular features of the socio-cultural context of "reform." Following this, I engage in a critical analysis grounded in identifying "strategies of symbolic construction" (Thompson, 1990). Following Thompson, I hold that paying attention to these strategies allows one to see how these teachers construct symbolic forms with meaning beyond what can be discerned from surface reading, that is, how their statements marshal meaning toward specific purposes.

Headmasters Become Noblemen: Effects of Educational Reform

Teachers and headmasters are just like slaves and noblemen. (Gao Su, in Group Discussion #5)

Eager to express forcefully her view of school-level relations, Gao Su paraphrases a text message received from Lao Le earlier the same day—one that I later learned had been passed around amongst teachers for some time. The comparison of teachers and headmasters in these terms relies on a terse juxtaposition of the present position of teachers (slaves) *vis-à-vis* headmasters (noblemen). The comparison is deliberately hyperbolic and sets to one side the fact that, as in most jurisdictions around the world, many headmasters are themselves former teachers. Declaring headmasters to be noblemen and teachers slaves, however, has the effect of imbuing Gao Su's feelings about the situation with gravity. Her declaration also invokes China's (undesirable) pre-revolutionary, feudal past. Indeed, the entire text message, translated below, gains its force by recalling revolutionary values and constructs a tongue-in-cheek commentary on the nature of present-day Chinese schools:

The changes in schools;	(学校的变化— <i>xue xiao de bian hua</i>);
Headmasters become noblemen;	(校长贵族化— <i>xiao zhang gui zu hua</i>)
Teachers, slaves;	(教师奴隶化— <i>jiao shi nu li hua</i>)
Students, ancestors;	(学生祖宗化— <i>xue sheng zu zong hua</i>)
Relations, complicated;	(人际复杂化— <i>ren ji fu za hua</i>)
Overtime, day and night;	(加班日夜化— <i>jia ban ri ye hua</i>)
Going to work, unpaid;	(上班无偿化— <i>shang ban wu chang hua</i>)
Inspection, more severe;	(检查严厉化— <i>jian cha yan li hua</i>)
Compensation, that of migrant workers;	(待遇民工化— <i>dai yu min gong hua</i>)
Emancipation is a myth.	(翻身是神话— <i>fan shen shi shen hua</i>)

This poem dwells on a number of negative effects of educational reform considered relevant by the teachers in this study, amongst them intensification of teachers' work ("overtime, day and night"), unsatisfactory levels of pay ("compensation, that of migrant labourers"), and the annoyance of an increasingly invasive managerialism ("inspection, more severe"). It does not, however, address the more optimistic outcomes of reform also acknowledged by participants to counterbalance these obviously undesirable trends. Increased pressure at work versus greater opportunity outside of the school, depleted job security versus heightened prestige of education—each of these contradictory pairs represents for participants the many paradoxes of an educational reform program strongly influenced by privatization and marketization.

Intensification

Of the themes to emerge from the data, teachers identify the intensification of their work as one of the most significant. 'Intensification' here refers to teachers' sense that they face longer hours, higher expectations, and increasing pressure to improve their ability to fulfil these duties. One indicator of the time commitment expected of teachers was the difficulty we had finding time to meet for group interviews. Over the course of five months, I had hoped to conduct four or more of these discussions, but we six consistently struggled to find the time to meet, managing to do so as an entire group only once. Even one-on-one meetings were extremely hard to arrange. Not surprisingly, our group conversations always began with an informal exchange of information on personal schedules. The following exchange is one example of such 'timetable talk', and provides an outline of Xiao Yan's and other participants' weekly time commitment:

Lao Ping: Do you have the entire day off every Sunday?
Lao Le: Yes.
Lao Ping: We have never taken a whole Sunday off. Saturday is our day off, but we have to work a half-day on Sunday. Totally, one and a half days off per week.
Lao Le: Terrible!

Lao Le's initial reaction would seem to indicate her feeling that Xiao Yan has things particularly hard, but her response obscures the fact that her schedule is lighter on this day only due to her shuffling of priorities.

Lorin: You have none? Don't you usually have classes [today]?
Lao Le: I have classes, but I gave them to other teachers. So I'm free today.
Lorin: Because you have a meeting tomorrow?
Lao Ping: Yes.

Later in the same session, Xiao Yan offered this elaboration of the coming afternoons' work, as well as some insight into the difficulties an intense schedule

presents:

Lao Ping: This afternoon I have four classes. I must prepare for my classes. Now, last night, yesterday afternoon...I had parents' meeting...so, I [had] no time to prepare today's classes.

The weekend schedule she describes is slightly shorter than on weekdays, but is, nonetheless, a full school day for students, if not teachers:

Xiao Yan: There are ten classes for my students today. For English...[I] teach each class [for] two [periods].

Lorin: What do you mean they have ten classes?

Lao Ping: Five in the morning, five in the afternoon.

Xiao Yan: Ya!

Lorin: 7:40 it will start?

Lao Ping: No, no, no. 8:00 o'clock...Each [period] lasts forty minutes.

Lorin: It's a normal...it's a normal school day, right?

Xiao Yan: No, special. Only on Saturdays (note: it is Sunday)

Lorin: Is [the Saturday schedule] longer?...

Lao Le: Shorter...In our school or the other schools...class lasts forty minutes.

Xiao Yan: Now on the weekdays, each class lasts forty-five minutes. But only on Saturday, because [there are] ten classes,...each class [is] forty minutes....Terrible! (everyone laughs)

Such a description might not seem like a particularly difficult schedule for teachers to maintain. Indeed, on a weekend workday, Xiao Yan teaches twice as many periods, four, as on a typical weekday. But one must take into account the demands of lesson preparation in a system in which “virtuosity” is highly valued (Paine, 1990). For Paine, virtuosity describes the Chinese practice of teaching from mentorship to planning to lesson delivery. The virtuoso model hinges on a conception of the teacher with not only expert *knowledge* (a condition to which few English teachers would lay claim), but also expert *delivery* of each lesson. To accomplish such perfection, teachers tend to spend many hours each day meticulously planning the detailed steps comprising each lesson. Furthermore, actual teaching hours represent only a portion of a teacher's daily responsibilities. Classroom teachers may perform in a variety of additional roles. When also appointed *banzhuren* (班主任—class advisor, similar to homeroom teacher) teachers take charge of an entire class of students. For Gao Su, Lao Le, Lao Ping, and Xiao Yan, being a *banzhuren* brings a modest salary stipend, but entails caring for the academic, social, and psychological welfare of more than sixty students. Wang Dian, for her part, takes the special duties of the *nianji zuzhang* (年级组长—grade leader), responsible for dealing with the daily affairs of the students and teachers of a single grade level. Another position available to teachers, *jiaoyan zuzhang* (教研组长—subject area head), puts them in an instructional leadership role over teachers in their subject area. Beyond these

teaching and administrative tasks, teachers attend school meetings and in-service training sessions.

These commitments are not unique to Chinese schools, nor are they specific to the current reform movement. But while weekend teaching does represent an element of intensification of teachers' work, in order to more fully understand the nature of participants' grievances, one must set aside such *quantitative* measures of time to consider instead the *qualitative* changes resulting from the mounting competition engendered under educational reform. For this group of teachers, one of the pressures they feel is to improve their own ability in an environment in which English has become a high stakes subject area:

- Wang Dian: Now, I think that because of the changes,...the task for us is very heavy.
- Lao Ping: Mmmmm. (she agrees)
- Wang Dian: Now I think...because I'm older (she laughs), my abilities are...poor!...
- Lorin: [You mean] your English skills are poor?
- Wang Dian: Ok (yes). And my vocabulary is poor, like you told me....So, if I want to teach my students well, I must be a good teacher. So, the first thing for me to do, I must improve my English level first, and then I can help my students improve their level.

Wang Dian's honest self-assessment is partly a statement of fact; her skills could be improved. But one also senses in her self-deprecating remarks the internalization of the precepts of Deng's reform program, with its critique of the "quality" (*suzhi*) of the nation, and its particular focus on the problems of teacher "quality." In other words, her sense of obligation to "self-renovate" demonstrates more than her own desire to be a better teacher; it is also importantly a reproduction of the general precepts of well-entrenched government policy. She is, of course, aware that external forces bear upon her and other teachers. In the following, she attributes demands for teacher development to "society," its "leaders," and a general condition of progress:

- Lao Ping: The society is advancing...[and] language is more useful.... So, now the leaders of the society, I think they must pay more attention to it....The society is advancing quickly...[and] language is very important.

At the school level, the pressure of high-stakes examinations for students at all levels fuels these expectations:

- Gao Su: You know, every university student, they have to pass one English exam....No matter she is learning chemistry, physics or English, they have to pass [the same] English examination.
- Lorin: Everyone writes the same examination?
- Gao Su: This exam is, actually it's very difficult, so those students have to learn English better in middle school.

Here, Lao Ping speculates on why her headmaster has called a meeting at the unusual time of 5:50pm on Sunday:

Lao Ping: Maybe they will say something about the midterm examination. Analyze [it]...[and] give many numbers[:] whose class is the highest, [whose] got the highest marks.

In addition to the obvious honours and humiliations attending such occasions, these results have important consequences for the future success of individual teachers. In schools like Lao Ping's, where students are grouped according to ability, teachers with less experience or with poor examination results are given classes of students not expected to achieve:

Lao Ping: [The young teachers will be given] the worst class to teach.
Lorin: You mean the worst grades?
Lao Ping: Yes. The lowest grades....In our school, we have three levels: the high, the medium, and the low.
Lorin: According to the examination marks?
Lao Ping: Yes. The [entrance] examination....In our school, for example, [one teacher] had taught four years. This year, she [had] a class which is the lowest students. After the midterm examination there was only one student [who] got higher than sixty.
Lorin: Really?
Lao Ping: Yes. She feels very, very sad. She doesn't feel confident in teaching.
Lorin: So, it's good if you have the high students?
Lao Ping: Yes. Maybe she [would] feel confident. But only one student passed the exam. The girl really was worried. She often said [she doesn't] want to teach now.

This system, of course, exhibits features of Paine's virtuoso model. Such a system is largely dependent on ideal models and necessarily produces hierarchies: seniority and success, however determined by the idiosyncrasies of a given school, are both rewarded.

But one cannot ignore the potential negative effects of such competition-based evaluation. The teacher in question experiences increasing stress and falling job satisfaction, and her school faces the potential loss of a teacher. Gao Su, by contrast, reports facing a different dilemma in her school:

Gao Su: In my school, [they are all] in the same class. I have to deal with all the students in my class. Very, very clever students and, at the same time,...the medium and also the...bad boys. (she laughs)
Lao Ping: I think it's [stressful] for the teachers to teach a class like that.
Gao Su: Very difficult.

Such an arrangement might suggest a more egalitarian approach, perhaps due to her school's origin as a "factory school" (i.e. owned and operated by a state

owned manufacturing enterprise), or it may be ascribed to the school's efforts to raise the examination results of all students. Whatever the motivation in this case, results on examinations of all kinds are treated seriously by school leaders, for student performance is the foundation upon which a school's reputation is built. A school's good name, in turn, attracts not only more registrants, but also academically stronger ones from lower grade levels. Fees charged to these students grow in conjunction with the school's standing, especially those associated with *chaoyuan* enrolment (i.e. fees charged to "outside" students). Stronger financial footing creates other advantages for a school in the form of new and better facilities and the ability to attract the best teachers with higher remuneration, as Gao Su explains:

- Gao Su: If [a] school cannot make money...the teachers will not get rewards [in addition to their] salary. So, [a teacher] can get two kinds of money every month. One part is the salary from the government,...and the other is from the school... about several hundred yuan. In my school it's also the same.
- Lorin: So, if the school is more famous, the part from the school is more?
- Gao Su: Yes, so if this school is good, it can pay extra money to its teachers. If this school is poor, the teachers get the money from the city government. No extra money. Nothing. So the teachers all want to go to the good schools to get more money.

Insecurity

There is, of course, a dark counterpoint to this potential advantage. The spectre of unemployment is always present:

- Lao Ping: It is said, the teachers in that school, [if] they didn't work hard, or they cannot make the students get a good mark, maybe they will lose their job....
- Lorin: Does this happen in your school as well? Any of you?
- Lao Ping: We have many. (everyone laughs nervously)
- Gao Su: Mine also has.
- Xiao Yan: In our school, one teacher....
- Gao Su: Only one [in mine].
- Lao Le: Every year we have less than ten. Four, five, six, seven, eight...
- Gao Su: So many! So many!

If teachers do not lose their jobs, they may still be penalized with lower salaries or even, as this remarkable story illustrates, forms of professional exile:

- Gao Su: An old math teacher worked with me last term....She complained about a lot of things that the leaders and the headmaster does. So no matter whether in a meeting or just in the work time, this old lady just complained. So all the leaders didn't like her.
- Lorin: She complained directly to them?

- Gao Su: Yes, and she even quarrelled with some very...I mean the leaders with very great power...Yes, so very strange....So this old teacher didn't get [a] job [placement].
- Lorin: So, she had her salary but no teaching?
- Gao Su: Yes, she had the salary. A very low salary. She had the salary with no work to do. So, one day in this term, the government asked one teacher to go to the countryside to help the local...schools teach....so our headmaster just gave this chance to that old teacher.

School leaders, no doubt, face similar pressures, but they also stand to profit from good results in the form of public plaudits and compensation, though monetary gain sometimes comes in ways that are less than above board. Indeed, one participant linked her school's demands on teachers to the school leaders' pursuit of *huise shouru* (灰色收入—"grey" or under the table income), including kickbacks paid by building contractors and others eager to supply services. Whatever various school administrators' motivation for organizing classes in a particular way, participants universally cited high expectations for student performance as an important source of stress in their lives.

Opportunity

But even as it presents challenges to their aspirations to a good life, competition also opens up avenues by which it might be achieved. Indeed, the opening-up to the outside world has engendered unique opportunities for financial gain to teachers of English. I have already discussed above the link between examinations, student performance, school reputation, and teachers' salary. But teachers also take advantage of "moonlighting" opportunities:

- Gao Su: You know, English teaching is the most important...in China now... That is why many, many English teachers earn... much money in their teaching. Not only in [their] school, but also after school. I mean they give extra classes to the students who want to learn English better.

Like school leaders, teachers earn substantial *huise shouru* in a number of ways. It is widely known, for example, that teachers tutor their own students in defiance of official guidelines, sometimes individually, but usually in small groups. Performing an equally if not more common job, many others teach courses at evening schools several hours per week, in Lao Le's case, earning about eighty *yuan* (\$12 CAD) per forty minute lesson. For a teacher whose regular monthly salary may be only 1000-1500 *yuan* (\$150-230 CAD and often less), such opportunities are difficult to pass up. Our group discussions themselves became a chance for Wang Dian to suggest that we take advantage of these opportunities despite practical barriers: In addition to extra teaching opportunities, participants have found other ways to utilize their highly valued skills. Each had at some

point acted in an advisory role and written and edited textbook materials for the local education press. In the case of three of them, they had travelled extensively throughout the country giving in-service training for teachers on behalf of the same company. And while none of these participants had personally *xia hai* (下海—gone into business), Wang Dian often held up her friend, who has had success in private business since leaving the teaching world, as a model of the new possibilities available to teachers. Such activities were sometimes represented as a form of resistance to or a complete rejection of poor school conditions and inadequate pay and, indeed, it is tempting to understand them as such. But teachers' engagement in private teaching also represents their adherence to the new economic circumstances, at best a co-optation of an undesirable set of conditions for their own purposes. In other words, their concerns over specific problems created under reform coexist with their participation in them.

Strategies of Symbolic Construction

Setting aside for now details of the effects of educational reform, I consider the strategies used by participants to construct these perspectives on reform. Perhaps the most common of these involves the use of *synecdoche*, in which a part is made represent the whole, or the whole a part. This strategy functions by obscuring from view the causes of observed phenomena, and the nature of interpersonal relations within the social structures and institutions. Specifically, participants often pointed to “society”—an undifferentiated, impersonal whole, as the root cause or fundamental force driving changes in education. In this example, Wang Dian responds to my probes into the causes of change:

Lorin: So,...somebody is asking you to do more, to teach the students more, so it means that you'll have to change and it's more difficult?

Wang Dian: Yes. Now, the second thing is the society is advancing...the language...the language is more useful, ok. Is too...

Lao Ping: Foreign language...

Wang Dian: Language is too. So, now the leaders of the society, I think they must pay more attention to it. The society is advancing quickly, fast...

“Society” and its forward advance, in other words, are the ultimate source of pressure on teachers. Gao Su has a similar take on things—

Lorin: I'm curious; I think you have said that it is more difficult even for you. [Has] it become more difficult?...

Gao Su: English teaching is becoming more and more difficult for the teachers, because the students...the parents, or even the society, they are asking more—

a view subsequently underscored by Wang Dian—

Lorin: So there's pressure from students, from parents, from yourself also?...

Lao Ping: Now I think there is pressure from all sides of the society. (Lao Ping laughs in agreement)

Such a strategy works in this case to evoke a sympathetic image, the teacher as a lone figure *shi mian mai fu* (十面埋伏—ambushed from all sides), under siege from a variety of actors—students, parents, and leaders, each of whom has gained power relative to teachers in a marketizing education system. Society, an imposing unity one could hardly be expected to successfully defy, exerts its will on the individual teacher or, alternatively, on a differentiated *group* of teachers. Synecdoche, thus deployed, has an essentially positive effect, despite the negative undertones of the specific symbolic form produced. In orienting their beliefs around such an outlook, and in doing so in a group interview setting, participants take steps toward building solidarity with other teachers. Participants use this same strategy to describe their resistance to the official hierarchy.

If the interview excerpts reproduced above provide ample evidence of differentiation and whole-part conflation, they also demonstrate the use of *trope* as a strategy of construction. Participants drew heavily on the trope of progress in their discussions around the effects of reform. The notion that Chinese society is continuously advancing came up frequently, here as partial critique of the present leadership:

Wang Dian: So, now the leaders of the society, I think they must pay more attention to it. The society is advancing quickly, fast.

This trope was prominent in both one-on-one and group discussions, a fact that would appear to reflect Wang Dian and other participants' absorption of the kind of political discourse that has become ubiquitous since being inaugurated by Deng. The following excerpt from the state news agency is but a single recent example of a theme that can be found in most government press material:

China's reform in rural areas, having made remarkable progress in the last 30 years, serves the joint purposes of safeguarding farmers' material interests, democratic rights and developing productivity. (Xinhua News Agency, September 4th, 2006)

“China is progressing,” “China is developing,” “China is on the correct path”—similar statements drone on in government propaganda channels and are subsequently taken up and repeated in everyday interactions. Whatever problems occur can be rationalized by the “fact” that China is a “developing country” with many difficulties that the government is continually struggling to overcome. When paired with the visibly obvious and statistically indisputable economic growth since 1976, “progress” becomes a seemingly irrefutable justification for the continuance of present reform policies and, by extension, maintenance of the status quo. Adherence to the “truth” of reform—i.e., that it represents

“progress”—weakens the force of observations that reveal certain problems (e.g., gender disparities in wages or the intensification of teachers’ work) to be the *result of* reform as opposed to the mistakes of a bygone era to be *corrected by* the new way. But even when errors are admitted, as has been nominally so in the case of “uneven development,” there would appear to be broad popular support for the idea that inequality is a normal condition if the country is to pass through a period of capitalistic development (i.e., socialism with Chinese characteristics) on its inevitable rise to prosperity.

Concerns over job security featured strongly in participants’ discussions of reform. In most cases, this anxiety was expressed in narratives of teachers who have been demoted, have had their salaries or status reduced, or who have lost their jobs entirely. This is not to suggest that all such stories are presented as an expression of solidarity with these teachers. In Gao Su’s story about the exiled math teacher, for example, a model is presented of a teacher who does not hold to accepted “teacher-like” behaviour. While Gao Su cannot be said to be unsympathetic to the specifics of this teacher’s grievances, she nonetheless constructs the tale using a number of strategies that render the teacher’s actions unsavoury and, thus, unworthy of emulation. Note that this is no ordinary teacher, but, rather, an “old” one who “complains a lot” and ‘quarrels’ with leaders. Where “old” (as 老 *lao* in 老师 *laoshi*/teacher) is most commonly applied as a respectful appellation for elders, here “old” is connected to the Chinese *jiu* (旧—worn or worn out) and indicates that individual’s antiquated thinking as well as her or his failure to keep up. In the present atmosphere—whether we label this period a “post-Mao” or “market economy” era, things deemed “new” and “advanced” are permeated with the positive valuations of the politically potent discourses of “reform” and “progress.” In addition to her oldness, this teacher plays the part of complainer in this story, a role that is, as discussed above, undesirable if occasionally understandable. More than this, she argues openly with leaders, thus subverting normal ways of interacting with those in higher positions and, thus, disturbing the school’s harmony, a condition considered of paramount concern in both traditional Chinese culture and current governance rhetoric. Despite the negative implications of such disciplinary action for all teachers, there is little evidence in Gao Su’s narrative that she considers the school’s leaders’ response either surprising or unfair. Note that the story concludes with Gao Su describing the teacher’s being sent to a countryside school, normally a kind of punishment, as a “chance”, an opportunity she didn’t necessarily deserve.

Conclusion

When I began this research, I tended towards the same kind of critical evaluations of Chinese teachers found in much of the literature on educational reform. What was revealed to me through the research process, however, was that the common negative responses could not be dismissed as obstinacy and/or ignorance. Teachers' thoughts on the effects of educational reform may be objectively accurate or not. Regardless of their accuracy, I would maintain that these accounts do tell us something important not only about teachers' opinions, but also about the failings of reform efforts. Whether educational leaders recognize it or not, teachers are always the primary subjects and agents of educational reform. In the case of the reform of Chinese EFL curriculum, they have been positioned as objects of reform at best, a troublesome bunch in need of remoulding and reform. There is little meaningful recognition of the material, psychological, and spiritual effects of marketization in a system still largely ruled by exam results. Put simply, teachers feel overwhelmed by the demands for results—to be achieved, in part, through pedagogical change—of policy leaders, school administrators, parents, and, no doubt, of foreign in-service trainers like me. Still, Chinese teachers are largely on board with the general aims of reform. They do not deny that their methods and strategies need to improve. When we pay attention to the multi-layered nature of symbolic forms through which teachers present their accounts of their lives and work, we find that teachers, while resistant, do not position themselves as a revolutionary force.

It should be clear by now that I reject any simplistic notion that everyday Chinese folk stand by passively as an overwhelming state, enriched under the market economy, implements its designs for a new China. Such folk are only apparently passive, and even then only to the eyes of the cultural outsider who sees in China a pale reflection of what he imagines his own society to be. My aim is not to overestimate the radical potential of everyday acts of resistance. To the extent that Chinese teachers engage in such acts, they are only able to do so insofar as they achieve a degree of discursive penetration into the sources of their own beliefs and practices. Teachers are not—and, by implication, nor is the general populace—passive dopes subjected to the whims of an acquisitive ruling elite; yet nor are they entirely able to transcend the material and cultural resources that are the starting point, the necessary conditions within which they go about complying and resisting the institutional directives that shape their lives as teachers (Archer 1995). Indeed, if there is a sense in which “the farthest east is but the farthest west” (Smith 2008), then surely this condition of material-cultural conditioning speaks to a common humanity that transcends an otherwise highly differentiated world.

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¹ Still, to residents of major and second-tier Eastern coastal cities, Shijiazhuang retains an aura of *tu* (土 – literally “soil” or “earth,” but inflected as a slight it connotes backwardness) and, by implication, much closer to “the rural” than they see themselves to be.