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# Consent and Dissent: A Study of the Reaction of Chinese School Teachers in Guangzhou City Schools to Government Educational Reforms


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# Consent and Dissent: A Study of the Reaction of Chinese School Teachers in Guangzhou City Schools to Government Educational Reforms

## **Abstract**

This paper presents detailed qualitative evidence from a case study of teachers in five Chinese schools in one city. It explicitly seeks to show how developments in government policy towards education have altered the management of teacher labour inside schools as well as the teacher labour process as expressed by the teachers themselves in interviews and questionnaires. In this paper, we explore supervision, work intensification, and the erosion of professionalism. We conclude that some changes have taken place as predicted by the labour process model, but that the reaction of the teachers to more extensive controls has been variable. In particular senior school managers did have greater control with high levels of supervision, but that was generally welcomed as preferable to the previous system of outside control and neglect. While workload increased overall, the teachers were more likely to have to work outside of normal duties rather than experience any increase in formal contractual obligations.

## **Keywords**

teachers; China school reform; teacher labour process; professionalism

# **CONSENT AND DISSENT: A STUDY OF THE REACTION OF CHINESE SCHOOL TEACHERS IN GUANGZHOU CITY SCHOOLS TO GOVERNMENT EDUCATIONAL REFORMS**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents research findings about the impact of recent Chinese government education reforms on school teachers' working lives. It provides a brief outline of the education reforms and their theoretical underpinnings, then explains our qualitative research methods, and finally presents findings and discussion of their impact on teachers in schools using labour process analysis and case study research methods in five secondary schools in Guangzhou city. The focus here is on professionalism, workload, and supervision of school teachers, developing the earlier work of Wu (2002).

We seek to test the general hypothesis that Chinese teachers in our five case study schools, would react more or less in the same ways to similar changes and pressures as studies of teachers in the UK and USA have suggested (Lawn 1995). They would in essence exhibit a greater sense of being 'deprofessionalised', resent closer supervision and inspection, and oppose workload intensification. In fact the study revealed a more mixed and subtle set of reactions, which accords with the general construct of teacher resilience in the face of a variety of externally imposed changes (Carter & Stevenson 2012; Price et al 2012, Mather & Seifert 2014). In general leading labour process theorists (Edwards 2007, 2010) have called for more detailed case studies of changing labour processes in order to provide empirical evidence for the theoretical debate on power and control at work. Research of teachers and lecturers in the UK

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and USA (Gitlin & Margonis 1995) have sought to illustrate through case studies these changes, and we apply these norms to Chinese teachers in our case study schools.

In all of this it is teachers' work – what they teach (curriculum and content); how they teach it (methods and technology); when and where they teach (estates and classroom controls); and class size, type of pupils, and freedom to do a professional job that really counts. Therefore control over teacher labour process in line with Taylor's precepts (1911) and Braverman's (1974) forceful analysis is crucial (Thompson & Newsome 2004). In general the state's role has been to grant more discretion to heads but within a tighter regulatory framework.

The main research issues therefore include a general proposition that teachers' professional autonomy has been reduced through a series of top-down government reforms implemented locally by newly empowered head teachers. This breaks down into subsections that include the locus of control over teaching content and methods in the classroom; the ways in which teachers are supervised internally and externally; and control over teacher time, workload, and general duties. The *sine qua non* of this paper is that the work of school teachers is too important to be left alone by government.

### **State Reform and the Changing Management of Schoolteachers**

The intensification of globalised trade competition and beggar-my-neighbour policies has gathered momentum especially after the 2008 crash and subsequent long-drawn out recession. The consequential social and economic pressures create the circumstances whereby state decision-makers need to urgently find both short-term fiscal and monetary solutions and long-term structural strategies to reformulate the role of markets, including labour markets (ILO 2011b). Part of the latter involves the search for skilled labour linked with educational achievements (ILO 2011a). Thus educational institutions, teaching processes, and learning outcomes become subject to quasi-market centralised regulation and local/site deregulation within an ever tighter legislative and funding framework (Burbules & Torres 2013). These take the form in both developed (UK and USA) and developing economies (China) of more central controls through inspection and teacher registration, more Taylorisation of teacher labour as senior management teams rule the schools, and more supply-side variation. As China's Deputy Director General of Basic Education, Wang Dinghua, said in a speech in April 2010: "Education must face modernization, the world, and the future ... We need to shift from a nation with *large* human resources to a nation with *strong* human resources".

Central government policy in several countries including the UK, USA and China, since the late 1980s, moved the public sector towards 'modernization' increasingly based on neo-liberalism and the free market model (Cheng 2000; Chomsky 1999). It prioritized the three Es of New Public Management (Walsh 1995): economy, effectiveness and efficiency (Ironsides & Seifert 1995, Corby & White 1999). In the 1980s UK schools were exposed to private sector management practices putting productivity, pay and performance at the centre of school management (Gleeson & Husbands 2003). The British 1988 Education Reform Act, for example, created a pseudo-market in education where schools, 'as autonomous institutions, need to develop highly customized HRM policies which reflected their own priorities in terms

of recruiting, retaining and developing staff (O'Neill *et al* 1994:17-18). Meanwhile school heads, as school-level managers, further managed teachers' labour process so as to make sure the reform was implemented in line with the edicts from the central government (Lawn 1988). Linked with labour process theory (Braverman 1974) the impact on teachers' work suggests a general trend towards, *inter alia*, work intensification, deskilling, and reduced professionalization (Evetts 2003).

Chinese education reforms, following those in the UK and USA, have focused on three inter-connected elements: increase supply side competition; a new emphasis on head teachers as managers/leaders; and changes to teacher labour process. Firstly, public choice theorists (Niskannen 1967) adopted the neo-liberal model, and argued for competition based on customer choice with reward for personal responsibility alongside external control. The UK government implemented policies to create fragmented (increasingly since 2010) supply side competition with academies and 'free' schools (Ball 2013).

Secondly, following the neo-liberal logic, greater competition is assumed to result in incentives to school managers, and challenges to teachers through closer inspection and the application of performance indicators with a link to rewards. Moreover, it raised managers and management systems to a central role (Dunsire 1999). As a result NPM was used to transform old bureaucratic public administration into a more 'modern' market form (Hood, 1991). This new approach brought public sector management, reporting, and accounting practices closer to business methods (Dunleavy & Hood 1994: 9). The ideology of 'managerialism' and 'neo-Taylorism' contributed to the dominance of NPM (Pollitt 1993, Bach & Kessler 2012). Managerialism espouses the importance of management and managers in all organizations, and allots them more rights to seek success. On the other hand, 'neo-Taylorism' emphasizes the setting of clear targets, and measuring performance against those targets to award or promote the individuals who get results (Seifert & Mather 2011). One of its themes is to raise public service efficiency through the breakdown of uniform organizations into many separate managed units; management have more visible and direct control over decision-making; to make performance standards explicit, formal and measurable; and with the focus on outputs and outcomes.

Thirdly, controlling the curriculum becomes the heart of the teacher labour process and generates control over teachers, and because teachers sell their labour power to the state they therefore recognize the authority of the state as their proxy-employer (Reid 2003: 571). Schooling itself produces indirect surplus value because of the link with the labour market through the credentialing process and more directly through developing skills and knowledge which increase labour productivity (Freeland 1986: 214). As a result managers seek control through accurate planning of the division of labour and task fragmentation, while workers retain control of narrow and specific skills. In this process of skill degradation there is a tendency for the work of conception to be separated off from the work of execution.

The changes to the teaching process has generally eroded professionalism by deskilling, work intensification, the loss of teaching and curriculum autonomy, the increase of supervision and more managerial control over recruitment, promotion, performance, pay and training through appraisal (Ozga & Lawn 1988; Ingersoll 2003). The teaching labour process was

historically constituted as largely face-to-face, teacher-pupil relationship, and was concerned with professionalism. The power relation between state and teachers, however, has now changed, with an adverse impact on teachers' work as there is 'a strong potential for differences in interest, value and purpose between the curriculum-and-classroom-oriented teacher and the market-and-budget-oriented manager' (Ball 1993:120). In the USA "the struggle of teachers for professional recognition and for the associated working conditions and rewards that might bring it about has a long and chequered history. More pay, higher status, greater autonomy, increased self-regulation and improved standards" have been increasingly thwarted goals (Hargreaves & Goodson 1996).

In China decision-making on labour management was highly centralized during the period of the planned economy. The 'personnel reform' in Chinese schools started in 1978 with the resumption of the 'normal' operation of management with the focus on improving teaching quality and ridding the system of low motivation, high turnover, and too much bureaucracy. "Quality-Oriented Education (*su zhi jiao yu*) is a national education reform initiative that presents ongoing opportunities and challenges to schools, local bureaus of education, and the overall educational system in China today. Our review points out that the new mission of Quality-Oriented Education advocates educational equity, curriculum reform, and systemic support for school-based management. However, at the operational level, there are great variations in terms of content domain, focus, and function among school evaluation schemes with notable regional differences. Furthermore, schools are still caught between the existing system that measures school performance by achievement and the intended accountability scheme that calls for enhanced student ability" (Cravens et al 2011: 153).

Until the late 1970s, China followed a Soviet-style model in seeking to construct a highly centralized political and economic framework. The decision-making on teaching labour management was tightly controlled by the local government through state planning (Wang 2004). Thus, the government made a majority of decisions related to the teaching process with the only parts under teachers' control being students' discipline and teaching methods. Teachers had little influence over their careers. School heads, as policy deliverers, were responsible for the smooth implementation of policy. Moreover, jobs for life ('iron rice bowl') associated with equal compensation system and cradle-to-grave welfare ('iron wage') resulted in job security irrespective of performance (Zhang 2004).

This dominant overall control from the government had negative influences on schools performance (Zhu 2005), such as poor quality of teaching and student learning outcomes. In 1985, the Chinese government promulgated 'the Decision of Education System Reform' alongside 'personnel reform' in schools. The 'Decision' pointed out the ways in which Chinese education lagged behind others partly due to the lack of direction in school management; a lack of qualified teachers; and a rigid old-fashioned curriculum. Lao and Cai (2009) have pointed out that heads were merely able to obey administrative orders from the government and carry out its plans. As a result there was chronic overstaffing and low quality teaching (Mu, 2009). The government controlled pay, recruitment and selection, funding, and dismissals (Liu, 2003; Song and Ma, 2009). After 1985 heads and secretaries of the school Party branch exercised collective leadership, but the head remained the junior partner in this power sharing arrangement.

The 1985 reforms raised autonomy for schools, adjusted the structure of education, and revised teaching contents and methods. Crucially for the first time heads could stop employing unqualified and incompetent teachers, with an increase in redundancy and early retirement (Liu 1999, Zhou 2002). The ‘iron rice bowl’ no longer exists, and the introduction of performance-related pay succeeded in breaking up the ‘iron wage’. Flexi-wages in line with real performance, special skills, extra responsibility and contribution measured by performance appraisal allowed heads to award a greater diversity of allowances and bonuses (Zhang 2004).

The 1995 Education Law established schools as corporate entities, and the 2003 ‘Policy that Deepens the Reform of Personnel System in Schools’ confirmed the school head as the legal manager, and so head teachers became actual leaders. The Ministry of Education took overall charge of planning, the national curriculum, establishment ceiling, teachers’ qualification and pay determination. The local government examined and approved teaching materials, confirmed teachers’ job description and pay grade (Mu, 2009). Meanwhile, pupils and parents were able to choose which school they attended, and this has created a highly competitive market ‘fever’ among parents seeking the best education for their children with the corollary of negative pressures on head teachers to appease such demands (Wu 2008).

This resulted in fierce competition between schools for funding based on the number of enrolled students and students’ results, while within schools teachers competed for resources among subjects and classes. School managers now have to define job descriptions of every position, and calculate the amount of teachers they need (Zhou 2008, Sun 2003b). Head teachers were granted more autonomy to manage their workforce and to deal with funding, facilities and personnel issues within schools. School heads are themselves now recruited and selected in fair and open competition (Li 2004). Head teachers in our case study schools are responsible for: long-term planning; making decisions about school regulations; and setting up and/or adjusting organisational structure. In recruitment and selection, school heads play a major part in the appointment of a team of senior and middle managers (*Guangzhou Head Teachers Responsibility System Ordinances*).

School heads are now responsible for recommending teachers’ professional evaluation to LEAs; setting up detailed items of appraisal; selecting ‘the outstanding teacher’; and supervising the discipline of all staff. Class size, for example, is under LEA control along with the number of classes in each school, and this drives any decisions on teacher numbers and new recruits (Song & Ma 2009). Thus the totality of these state-inspired reforms allows for greater flexibility at school management level but within a basic set of quality and efficiency standards (Hunnum & Park 2007; Hunnum et al 2008).

These UK (Ofsted 2007) and Chinese government (Mok 2003) school reforms are in line with global movements (Levin 2010). The Chinese Government issued ‘The Policy that Deepens the Reform of personnel system in schools’ in 2003 and extended it in 2008. It was introduced in a new western-style system related to market-oriented competition and job insecurity, higher productivity and more staff mobility (Cooke 2005). Head teachers were offered more autonomy to manage their workforce. As a result there is now a relatively more flexible labour market at the service of the forces of globalization (Chan 2000: 260), and schools play an important role in creating a more flexible and enskilled workforce.

## **Research Methods**

The main research tool was case studies in Chinese schools, collecting quantitative data by questionnaire, and qualitative data by documentation and interviews with teachers. This involved five schools in two different districts in Guangzhou in 2010. Johnson's research (1984) into USA schools used a diverse sample of six districts thus minimising distortions. The debate on such research methods has been grounded in the need to return to evidence-based worker-centred studies rooted in a focus on the dynamic as between the workplace and external forces (such as government decrees) and as between teachers *qua* workers and their managers (Edwards 2005, Vidal 2007).

This study covers five schools in two districts selected to vary by district size, economy, students' composition, educational history; and with the five schools having different characteristics of school level, location and administrative style. One district is Yuexiu with a strong education tradition, the other one is Haizhu District which is a new town with limited resources. Two schools in the Yuexiu District were studied: the No.27 Middle School and the No. 13 Middle School. The Haizhu District involved three schools: the No.5 Middle School, the No.42 Middle School, and the Nanshi Middle School.

For each school questionnaires, document research, and interviews were used. Questionnaires (see appendix B) were designed in Chinese and translated into English. The response rate of the No.27, the No.13, the No.42 and the Nanshi reached over 90%, although that of the No.5 has only 52%. On average, the response rate is more than 75% (565 actual returns). All full-time permanent teaching staff were given questionnaires, and the generally high response rate was due to strong personal links between the researcher and the school head teachers (Morris & Wood 1991). The teachers filled in the questionnaire and returned it to the researcher in school time, and this also helped develop the trust required for a high turnout. The tables presented are of simple one-way descriptive frequencies, and are displayed to the nearest whole percentage point around a Likert-type scale (Likert 1932). The information in the text is presented in a general form with collapsed categories indicating (strong) agreement and (strong) disagreement with a particular proposition. We do not wish to draw general conclusions from this survey, but it is indicative of teacher feelings and corresponds with other such studies.

There were twenty-five interviews on a one-to-one face-to-face semi-structured basis. They were recorded by MP3 player in Cantonese and Mandarin, and transcribed into English. Sixteen school teachers were interviewed along with five heads and four LEA officers. The teachers were selected with different characteristics of grade, subject, gender, and age group. They were asked a similar set of questions to those in the questionnaire (see appendix A) and given opportunities to expand upon their views. We also examined some official documents issued by Central and Local Government, as well as from the sample schools (e.g. Websites, minutes of meetings, and a few basic staff records). What follows is only one section of the research undertaken.



## Discussion of Findings

In each of the five selected schools we interviewed teachers and asked them to respond to a detailed questionnaire about their perceptions of working lives. The status of teacher beliefs (Pajares 1992) has been considered as an important variable in determining actual attitudes that may influence behaviour. The analysis is rooted in labour process theory and focussed on the extent to which their work had intensified under the new regulations. If, as they agreed, they were working longer and harder, so our inquiry led, *pari passu*, to the shape and form of this increased work. We examined issues of classroom teaching methods and control over teaching content. This in turn led on to the extent of close supervision from inside the school and from external agencies. Finally, the sum of these parts allowed us to formulate a general impression as to the erosion of professional autonomy as measured by their attitudes towards management control.

### 1. Working time, workload, and work intensification

After the reforms, a competitive culture became one key theme of teachers' career and lives with work intensification as well as work extensification generated through a lengthening of the working day/week (Mather et al. 2007, 2009). School managers are now allowed to make staff redundant because of tight budgets and savings on labour costs. Work intensification is an inevitable consequence in teachers' lives if higher standards for more pupils are to be met with fewer staff. The need to control the complexity of the process and the shift of the deskilled teachers reinforce the rise of administration. Cater (1997) points out teachers' non-teaching/managerial workload enhances job insecurity, while due to growing class sizes, more marking and more meetings, they still have to prepare extra classes, parents' evening and so on, participate in meetings and in-service retraining in their own time (Sinclair et al 1996).

For Chinese teachers, through analyzing and redesigning positions, schools were able to simplify organizational structures and change teachers' workload (Wang 2004). Schools stopped employing unqualified and/or incompetent teachers (Zhou 2002). Moreover, the state now allows schools to undertake redundancy and early retirement for internal restructuring. Even in some regions with ample supply of teachers, for example, in Guangdong Province, it was still below the national standard ratio of teachers and pupils that on average 3.4 teachers covered one class which is supposed to have 50 pupils. As a result, teachers in Guangdong are feeling stressed because of understaffing and overwork. According to Sun's (2003a) survey, more and more teachers work longer hours, and have more responsibilities for extra classes, more homework, and more exams.

In our survey half of the respondents agreed that their hours had been increased (question 15), and three-quarters agreed that they needed longer with pupils to teach them to the relevant standards (question 16). The interviews further supported the analysis: *'The teaching is really increasing. The reason is not only for more classes, but also to give more exercises to students and spend more time on answering their questions'*. Fierce competition over students' results means spending longer hours on teaching and cramming.

In the survey 57% said that they have insufficient time at work to prepare for classes (question 17) requiring them to work extra hours to deal with the preparation for classes.

Another 73% of teachers agreed that they spend longer than ever on preparation and marking (question 18), and 93% added that they needed to do preparation and marking even during non-office hours (question 19).

A female teacher thought: *'Because of increasing teaching hours, the hours for marking and preparation must be increased accordingly. More exercises mean more preparation and marking. On the other hand, due to more students studying in the middle schools, it takes more time to mark more exam paper and exercise books'*. There is no doubt about the connection between the increasing teaching hours and the long hours for preparation and marking. The rising number of students also means increasing hours to meet more students' needs, more parents' visits, more exam papers, and more exercise books to check.

In question 20, 60% teachers agreed they were working harder than before, although 37% disagreed. In question 21, 97% teachers agreed that 'they are sometimes too tired to teach', and 68% had strong views on this. The picture is one of harder working teachers increasingly tired out by their daily duties (Zhou 2008).

In interview: *'My work becomes harder. Due to increasing work time and workload, I am feeling huge physical and mental pressure'*. Many teachers agreed with her. Teachers were feeling annoyed and stressed so that they could not concentrate on their jobs, and as a result some took early retirement and others prolonged sick leave.

Three-quarters of the teachers deemed they had more additional tasks besides teaching (question 22). In the interviews, most teachers complained that taking on more administrative tasks meant they had to sacrifice their working hours relating to teaching, preparation and marking. In fact, these practices are the most essential responsibilities in their mind. Just like the comment of a female teacher: *'I need to take part in more meetings and submit more reports than before. These meetings refer to administrative tasks rather than the professionalism, for instance, about regulations, supervision, training, application for the title of the technical post. In my opinion, it robs the time of teaching and being with students. Is it a right balance?'* Again this was a typical comment among most of those interviewed. Teachers thought that increasing workload for administration is not very helpful for improvement of teaching and instructions to students. Eventually, it is likely to endanger teaching quality, students' results and school performances.

In question 23, 55% recognised that the amount of covering of classes of absent colleagues has increased, although 43% teachers thought it was the same as before the personnel reform. In the interviews, given that more teachers had sick leave and early retirement, the amount of cover of classes of absence colleagues had increased. As was said: *'In this term, more teachers are asking for leave or early retirement. As a colleague, I have take the responsibility to cover the class of absent teachers'*. Our research, therefore, showed, *inter alia*, that workload had increased and that most teachers believed that this was detrimental to their professional working lives.

## *2. Control over teaching contents and methods*

According to our results, teachers do indeed have some control over their teaching. Over 90% teachers claimed that they could make some changes to the structure and

organization of the curriculum (question 5). In question 6, 82% of teachers understood the national curriculum had changed the scope for teachers' professional judgments. As a result, the national curriculum may restrict teachers' teaching autonomy, and its significance outmatches their professionalism. The results of interviews seemed to reinforce the data from the questionnaires. In 2005, the state rid itself of the old 'Didactical Guideline', and started to use 'the Curriculum of New Standard' that represented a new teaching contents, more fashionable and more comprehensive teaching methods with new technical equipment and teaching software. Here are some reactions from those interviewed about this.

A female teacher from Yuexiu 13 school noted: *'the teaching content is dependent on the Curriculum of New Standard made by the state. Teaching relies on the prescribed targets and teaching materials. I need to follow strictly the contents of assessment'*. It is unquestionable that lesson content cannot be changed by teachers themselves. They must choose the content of the Curriculum of New Standard and only make some modifications to the supplementary information of assessment. Otherwise, the student results cannot be guaranteed, and it might have a negative impact on school performance.

A male computing teacher from Haizhu 5 school stated: *'The major teaching content is compulsory, and must be designed according to the New Curriculum Standard. The rest of the content belongs to elective courses, accounting for a small part of the total. The contents in this part need to be kept updated to new technology and new information. They must be suitable to inspire students' to study'*. So teachers have some control over part of elective courses, although that is not essential and only a small non-examinable part.

Questions 7 and 8 sought to assess control over classroom practices. Up to 90% of teachers believed that the steps needed for classroom improvement were clearly outlined (question 7), and 96% teachers agreed that they should follow the curriculum guidelines (question 8). We found that most teachers just implement the guidelines step by step, and have little control over their classroom practices.

A female teacher from Nanshi school believed: *'Traditionally, I just must carry out steps of the Curriculum of New Standard. The steps and instructional goals for students are clearly defined. We don't need to take a lot of care about how to develop an outline. But sometimes, I can make my classes more interesting based on my experiences'*. Chinese teachers tend to follow the prescribed guidelines for content and methods resulting in relatively low levels of control over classroom practices. Overall the new systems seem to have re-enforced the lack of clarity around teacher status and professionalism, thus allowing school managers to exert greater downward pressure on the job of the teacher.

### 3. Supervision

The level of supervision, inspection and appraisal in teaching has been increased everywhere: 'performativity' has arisen as an essential issue in education, which 'is reminiscent of Fordist work relations in as much as the worker is tightly surveyed, with attempts to render transparent the details of practice' (Avis 2005:212). Head teachers, in particular, have more direct influences on supervising teachers and the school programme than before, his sometimes

results in management focusing on performance for inspection rather than the avowed intention of inspection of performance (Perryman 2009; Pianta & Hamre 2009).

In order to guarantee economic competitiveness, pupil performance has led national governments to seek greater accountability for increasing educational quality. Inspection sustains the movement towards external and contractual accountability (Paine & Fang, 2006). Within the context of the global teacher reform, accountability is a term used to identify a number of actions (accreditation, standards development, curricular change, high stakes testing, credentials, career ladders) directed at identifying and enforcing 'best practices' in teacher education, development and teaching (Tatto 2006: 236).

Appraisal makes most teachers feel demotivated with its lack of transparency and fairness, and they worry that their compensation may be negatively affected (Johnson 1984, Grace 1985). Appraisal has become a political weapon by government to control teachers, and allows for more for bullying and layoffs (Seifert 1996). Even earlier Johnson (1980) argued that performance-based staff layoffs in the USA caused trouble because of the lack of fair and standardised system-wide procedures when the policies translated into practice.

In terms of the move towards light-touch inspection which involves reduced frequency and/or less inspection time Codd (1999) argues that such a kind of performance management relies on low trust, because a performance culture enforced through a series of more direct and closer inspections and targets operates as a 'blame culture'. In Chinese schools, it is easier to carry out some straightforward and formal supervisory policies made unilaterally by the government. Monitoring teachers' performance is written formally into a job description, and accountability has become a popular issue so that each school requires teachers to 'learn the spirit' from the policy documents and make sure of the implementation (Zhang 2004). Moreover, Yu (2003) suggests that appraisal allows for greater control over teachers' labour process with limited association with pay, whereas it played an essential role in evidence of dismissal and bullying.

In this section, we test the extent of supervision within the schools, and examined teachers' views on the direction of control and the possible benefits of supervision and observation. Question 9 shows that 94% teachers reported they were supervised by management. At the same time, over 86% teachers claimed that the supervision also came from other teachers (question 10). Nonetheless, more than 80% teachers said they had a positive feeling about the supervision system (question 11). This indicates both the acceptance of the dominant system of supervision, and a willingness to learn from positive supervisory support.

Those interviewed told a different and more compelling story. They reported mainly negative experiences of closer supervision: *'I have an unpleasant sense from a more serious supervision. Managers frequently check our attendance, and they enforce that we have to stay at school in all days. If we are not in the office, our pay will be cut. Actually, we are required to stay at school in teaching hours and some sections of inquiry hours. We don't have freedom we ought to have'*. Clearly, teachers felt discontent and were stressed by the experience.

Questions 12, 13 and 14 refer to attitudes to control on competence and teaching task in order to explain why teachers had mixed feelings from the supervision process. 78% felt that

supervision was a tool for checking teachers' competence (question 12). This mixed message was confirmed as 82% agreed that teaching observations were used to instruct them (question 13), but 92% saw some benefit in terms of being better teachers (question 14).

Exploring in more detail in the interviews, teachers basically agreed that supervision and teaching observation assisted their competence, and improved teaching and work productivity. However, the issue of frequency was noted by a male teacher from the No.13 Yuexiu Middle School: *'I welcome teaching observations. The comments from school managers and other teachers are very useful for my teaching. But I am annoyed and confused about too many observations and comments. I am always having others' eyes on what I did.'* Teachers were suffering from too frequent checks, and as a result they began to have more and more complaints about closer supervision and teaching observations. It is possible that teachers may be demotivated by such high-frequency checking. Generally, regular close supervision has a dual function as noted as between encouragement and learning on the job, and oppressive management 'watching'. As such, both observations of classroom practice and promises of professional development may be used as a means of oppressive forced change, while remaining deeply ambiguous for those involved as evident in Hall and Noyes' (2009) study of schoolteachers.

#### 4. *Professional autonomy*

It is true that 'teachers have historically tended not to enjoy high levels of autonomy because of their employee status, and therefore it is a form of "legitimated professionalism" based on "licensed autonomy" – "legitimated" in the sense that the State places its seal of approval on it, and "licensed" in the sense that it is granted with strictly definite limits' (Smyth 1991: 326). The contents and methods of teaching have become more standardised because of normative assessment to measure whether students have achieved learning goals, and classroom practice has altered from the traditional non-intervention to greater intervention with strong standardised and normalized characteristics.

A relocation of job control has taken place with managers instead of teachers controlling the work process through prescribing knowledge and action even though they are not experts in making teaching decisions (Robertson 2002). Increasingly tight budgets force head teachers to make unilateral decisions on human and physical resources including working more hours, timetabling and available facilities (Seifert 1996). Chinese reforms after 2008 were based on teachers having more autonomy through 'school-based management', 'teacher empowerment' as well as 'decentralized decision-making' involving colleagues' observation, talk and sharing. In fact such a collaborative teacher development that displayed 'collegiality', 'team-work', 'co-operation' and 'functional flexibility' turned into the themes of the new work relationship in the UK and USA (Berry 1988). Teachers are free only to 'decide how to meet state and local goals for children while accountable for their process' (O'Neil 1990:6). Collegiality becomes a technical requirement presented in job descriptions and specifications, and a label of professionalism. In reality, such a kind of 'professionalism' is only a way of 'controlling teachers ideologically' relies on 'tactical control' with indirect presentation. Obviously, some teachers felt deskilled and restricted in their professional autonomy, however, other teachers considered declining professional autonomy and rising accountability as a kind

of 'new professionalism' (Woods & Jeffrey 1997), and gained from the potential for a margin of manoeuvre between the imposed centralized policies and their school-based implementation (Osborn 2006).

In the context of Chinese schools, the tradition of teaching is to follow strictly very explicit didactic outlines issued by the Education Department. They began with much lower levels of autonomy compared with teachers in UK and USA. The *Stipulations of Teacher Qualification Certification* stand for the introduction of teacher licensure and reinforcement of the standards for entry of teaching (Paine and Fang 2006). Working as collegial professional communities within schools for the purpose of delivering a rigorous national curriculum illustrates the move from organic and formal control system in China.

We have tried to capture the teachers' feelings through questions about control over tasks, timetable, curriculum and methods. The results show the extent to which the teachers felt they were controlled by managers. In question 1 on average across the schools 75% of the respondents believed management were in control of most key decisions, and this rose to 93% (question 2) when asked about timetabling. That means a large majority of teachers felt that they had little influence on teaching professionalism and the arrangement of their own classes and the timetables. The need to take orders from management appeared paramount. A male teacher (Haizhu 42) noted: *'although head teachers inquire about teachers' opinions, we are not finally the deciders about our teaching and the arrangements related to teaching'*.

Despite these findings 72% (question 3) felt they had professional autonomy, although most agreed with this without great enthusiasm. But only just over half believed themselves to be treated as a professional by the managers with 45% disagreeing. This type of split raises questions about the self-ascribed nature of professionalism and what exactly it means in this context. It suggests that Chinese teachers define their professionalism in a much more narrow and limited way than their European and USA counterparts.

Most teachers recognised that they were a professional with a high level of professional autonomy in some aspects of their work, but they also complained that their reputation had decreased in the eyes of not only students and parents, but also the wider society. For example, a female teacher (Yuexiu 27) said: *'I think we cannot get a high enough reputation like a lawyer, a doctor, even a civil servant. If I can choose again, I may not be a teacher'*. This typical comment reflected real disappointment with the perceived decline in repute.

## **Conclusions**

The teaching autonomy of Chinese teachers is mainly under strict state-derived management authority and remains highly controlled. Teachers have some limited discretion over the structure and organization of the curriculum. This matters since the national curriculum provides the vital guidelines to regulate teaching content and teaching methods. For supervision, Chinese teachers are supervised by both management and other teachers. They have not only positive but also negative experiences of supervision for their jobs and teaching, and this links in with evidence of greater work intensification both in the aspect of work time and workload.

Overall the objective of the government reforms in China appear to be similar to those in the UK and are largely to be expected when any nation seeks to alter education as part of an economic objective of sustained growth. The difficulty is represented by the dilemma at the heart of teacher management reform: as autonomous professionals teaching in the classroom teachers must be qualified and trusted to deliver at least a standard set of outcomes based on nationally agreed content and methods. On the other hand control over the actual process when aligned with the need to reduce unit costs per pupil results in greater management pressure to perform in more routinized and less professional ways. Thus the results we have found reflect a range of different experiences from positive to negative, from more wriggle room to teach to less choice in judgment, and from more intensive working life to less room for individual professionalism. As has been found elsewhere frequently key dimensions of school reform require new forms of labour/management collaboration (Urbanski & Erskine 2000).

We conclude that some changes have taken place as predicted, but that the reaction of the teachers to more extensive controls has been variable. In particular the increased control and supervision by senior school managers was generally welcomed as preferable to the previous system of outside control and neglect. While workload had increased overall, the teachers were more likely to have to work outside of normal duties rather than experience any increase in formal contractual obligations. The teachers we interviewed were more forthcoming about their working lives, but the overall impression was that their worries were now in line with those of professionally qualified teachers in the UK and USA: too much focus on labour-market driven outcomes; not enough scope for variation in method and content to reflect the needs of the pupils; and too much unhelpful, as well as some welcome and helpful, interference from senior teachers in their teaching lives.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

### Questions for School Heads

1. Why did you choose to work in the school sector?
2. How do you actually feel about your job?
3. What are the major issues facing you in the school?
4. What is your input into teachers' work?
5. What do you think of the inspection and appraisal system for teachers?
6. What is the teachers' workload like?
7. Are they suffering increasing working pressures?
8. How would you rate your level of staff morale?
9. How do you set up teachers' performance targets?
10. Can you tell me about staff issues in your school?
11. Could you describe the staffing level in your school?
12. Is your school suffering from unreasonable levels of voluntary resignation?
13. Have you ever carried out the redundancy in your school?

14. How would you describe the relationships you have with teachers?
15. What do you think about the government’s personnel reform?

Questions for School Teachers

1. How do you feel about being a teacher?
2. How do you actually feel about your job?
3. Can you tell me about what your typical day/week?
4. How much autonomy do you consider that you have in your job?
5. How do you organise your day?
6. Who makes the decision of organising your work?
7. What do you think of the inspection and appraisal system in your school?
8. How would you describe your current workload level?
9. Are there more pressures than before to meet targets?
10. How would you describe your level of morale at work?
11. What do you feel about performance management system in your school?
12. What do you think of the appraisal system in your school?
13. What do think of the impact of the government’s personnel reform?

**Appendix B: Questionnaire Results**

*Question 1: To what extent do you agree that teaching decisions are under the control of management?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	14	12	20	12	15	15
Agree	56	61	58	62	67	60
Disagree	24	19	18	23	14	20
Strongly disagree	1	2	1	0	0	1
Don't know	5	6	3	3	4	4

*Question 2: To what extent do you agree that the classes you teach and timetables are determined by management?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	54	49	55	53	58	53
Agree	41	42	43	38	35	40
Disagree	4	8	2	5	4	4

Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	1	0
Don't know	2	2	1	3	1	2

*Question 3: To what extent do you agree that you have high degree of professional autonomy in your job?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	5	11	17	14	17	13
Agree	55	61	65	56	58	59
Disagree	31	18	16	22	20	21
Strongly disagree	5	3	1	3	3	3
Don't know	5	7	1	4	3	4

*Question 4: To what extent do you agree that you are treated like a professional?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	4	8	11	5	11	8
Agree	38	43	45	47	42	44
Disagree	38	38	29	27	29	32
Strongly disagree	18	8	11	14	12	13
Don't know	3	2	3	6	6	4

*Question 5: To what extent do you agree that you can make some changes to the structure/organization of the curriculum?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	21	18	38	33	30	29
Agree	68	70	54	57	59	61
Disagree	7	10	8	6	4	8
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	1	0	0
Don't know	3	2	0	3	6	2

*Question 6: To what extent do you agree that the national curriculum has changed the scope for teachers' professional judgment?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	13	11	23	20	17	18
Agree	65	65	62	60	70	64
Disagree	18	16	12	15	9	14
Strongly disagree	2	3	2	0	0	1
Don't know	2	5	1	4	3	3

*Question 7: To what extent do you agree that steps that teachers should implement for classroom improvement are clearly outlined?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	21	18	38	32	30	29
Agree	68	70	54	56	59	61
Disagree	7	10	8	7	4	8
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	1	0	0
Don't know	4	2	1	3	6	2

*Question 8: To what extent do you agree that teaching content and methods need to strictly follow the curriculum guidelines adopted by the school?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	43	43	54	44	47	47
Agree	51	50	46	52	48	49
Disagree	3	6	0	3	0	2
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	1	0
Don't know	3	1	0	2	3	1

*Question 9: To what extent do you agree that you are supervised by management?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	47	49	46	56	48	49
Agree	49	44	47	37	45	45
Disagree	3	5	6	3	8	5
Strongly disagree	1	0	0	2	0	0
Don't know	0	2	1	3	0	1

*Question 10: To what extent do you agree that you are supervised by other teachers?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	40	31	34	36	40	36
Agree	54	51	51	47	46	50
Disagree	5	15	10	10	11	10
Strongly disagree	2	0	1	3	1	1
Don't know	0	3	3	3	1	2

*Question 11: To what extent do you agree that the supervision process is a positive experience for teachers?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	23	14	22	15	19	19
Agree	55	68	63	59	61	61
Disagree	15	16	9	18	14	14
Strongly disagree	4	0	2	3	3	2
Don't know	4	2	4	3	3	3

*Question 12: To what extent do you agree that supervision is a device for checking your competence?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	12	12	24	13	15	16
Agree	60	61	60	60	55	60
Disagree	20	24	10	22	17	18
Strongly disagree	7	0	4	3	6	4
Don't know	1	3	2	3	6	2

*Question 13: To what extent do you agree that teaching observations are about telling you how to do your job?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	22	15	23	20	25	21
Agree	59	63	64	65	50	61
Disagree	13	19	10	10	17	13
Strongly disagree	2	0	1	3	5	2
Don't know	4	3	2	2	3	2

*Question 14: To what extent do you agree that teaching observations are helpful to you in your teaching?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	28	22	27	30	32	28
Agree	58	71	67	59	66	64
Disagree	10	5	4	6	0	5
Strongly disagree	3	0	1	1	0	1
Don't know	1	2	0	3	1	1



*Question 15: To what extent do you agree that your teaching hours have 'increased'?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Greatly increased	24	34	23	29	36	28
Increased	20	30	21	19	17	22
Stayed the same	54	35	53	46	43	47
Decreased	3	0	1	5	2	2
Greatly decreased	0	0	2	1	2	1

*Question 16: To what extent do you agree that you need more time with pupils to teach your subject properly?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	45	26	27	35	28	32
Agree	37	42	47	40	52	43
Disagree	17	30	22	22	19	22
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	2	0	0
Don't know	1	2	1	3	2	2

*Question 17: To what extent do you agree that you have sufficient time at work to prepare for classes?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	5	3	9	2	6	5
Agree	30	36	34	40	56	37
Disagree	45	53	43	47	33	45
Strongly disagree	19	7	14	10	3	12
Don't know	1	1	0	1	2	1

*Question 18: To what extent do you agree that the hours you spend on marking and preparation have increased?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Greatly increased	58	48	49	47	50	50
Increased	23	25	23	23	23	23
Stayed the same	19	23	26	23	27	24
Decreased	0	3	1	5	0	2
Greatly decreased	0	1	2	1	0	1

*Question 19: To what extent do you agree that you need to do preparation and marking even during non-office hours?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	65	54	59	50	39	55
Agree	29	39	37	40	52	38
Disagree	5	6	3	9	6	5
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	1	1	0	2	3	1

*Question 20: To what extent do you agree that you are working harder?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	5	7	14	9	8	9
Agree	50	49	51	50	54	51
Disagree	39	32	29	30	18	31
Strongly disagree	5	5	3	7	12	6
Don't know	0	7	4	4	8	4

*Question 21: To what extent do you agree that you are sometimes too tired to teach?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	78	65	65	69	64	68
Agree	21	32	33	29	33	29
Disagree	1	2	2	2	2	2
Strongly disagree	0	0	0	0	0	0
Don't know	0	0	4	1	2	1

*Question 22: To what extent do you agree that you are taking more additional responsibilities besides teaching?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Strongly agree	31	36	28	30	38	32
Agree	43	38	48	46	29	43
Disagree	20	17	19	20	25	20
Strongly disagree	1	2	1	1	2	1
Don't know	6	6	4	3	6	5

*Question 23: To what extent do you agree that the amount of covering of classes of absent colleagues has 'increased'?*

District	Yuexiu		Haizhu			Average
School	No.27	No.13	No.5	No.42	Nanshi	
Greatly increased	29	41	29	17	19	28
Increased	28	33	24	24	26	27
Stayed the same	41	25	45	54	50	43
Decreased	2	0	1	3	3	1
Greatly decreased	0	1	1	2	2	1

### About the Authors

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