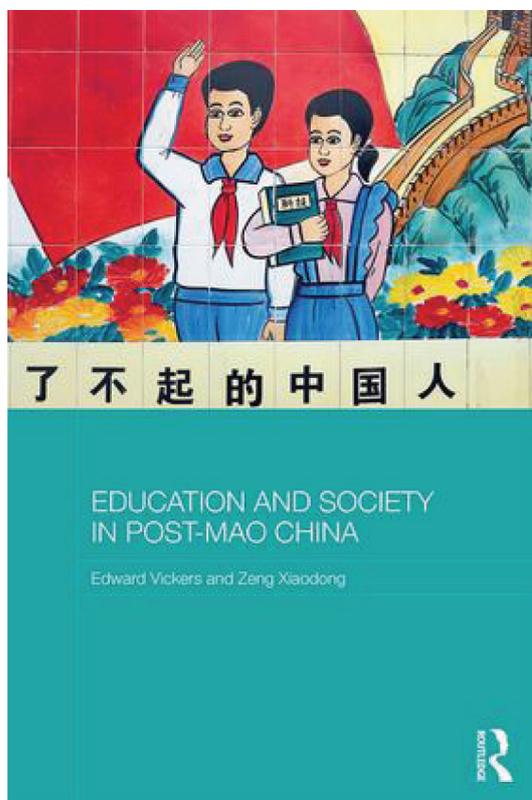


Book review

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Education and Society in Post-Mao China, by Edward Vickers and Zeng Xiaodong

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The cover image of this book neatly encapsulates many of the features of the Chinese education system that are discussed within its pages. Two students, one clutching a book entitled, in Chinese, *Technology*, and the other with their right arm raised in a gesture of respect, stand in front of a section of the Great Wall, with a large red flag waving behind them and a sea of flowers – a symbol of youth – at their feet. Each is wearing a red scarf, the uniform of the Young Pioneers of China, the national youth movement run under the auspices of the Communist Party. Below the image is a slogan that translates as 'remarkable Chinese people'. (I am grateful to Qianyun Yu for helping me to understand this image and its meanings.) The image reflects the ongoing importance of the Chinese past in the present, and it emphasizes the part that education plays in the promotion of national identity and popular political loyalty, as well as its central role in supporting economic development. It also reflects

the wide-ranging concerns of this book, in which Edward Vickers and Zeng Xiaodong deal with these issues and more, in what claims to be the first monograph on Chinese education in the post-Mao era.

Tackling this vast topic is a challenge, and Vickers and Zeng's aims are ambitious. The first quarter of the book places the recent history of Chinese education within both international comparative context – considering the validity, or otherwise, of an 'East Asian' model of the relationship between education and economic development – and the context of China's own political history. The chapters then proceed thematically, considering different levels of education and some issues of particular importance: early childhood education and care, basic education, the school curriculum, the teaching profession, assessment in senior high schools, marketization and competition, vocational and technical education, and then higher education, with a final chapter on the international dimension. Vickers and Zeng's task is complicated by the diversity of educational organization and provision in China: as they note (p. 78), there is no single Chinese education system, but rather 'a congeries of sub-systems increasingly divergent from province to province or county to county', the 'institutionalisation [of] a deeply fragmented model of Chinese citizenship'. Nevertheless, over time and across the geographical spread of China, a number of key themes seem almost ever-present. Emerging strongly from the book is a sense of the tensions that can arise between the political and economic aims of education.

A second central theme in the book is the importance across the education systems of the idea of *suzhi*, translated as 'quality'. As Vickers and Zeng (p. 127) note, the concept itself embodies a central contradiction and can imply different pedagogies: on the one hand, 'intellectual' *suzhi* is developed through critical thinking, whereas 'political' or 'moral' *suzhi* is more a matter of the transmission of political orthodoxy. When it comes to higher education, in particular, there have been 'fundamental contradictions' between the two objectives, something that Chinese policymakers themselves have been aware of (p. 277). The education system plays a vital role in the promotion of *suzhi*, although its best-known feature – the *gaokao* and other intensive traditional examinations – are potentially at odds with it. *Suzhi* is a vague quality, but its absence can be identified in, for example, 'sloppiness' of handwriting (p. 138): Vickers and Zeng note the importance that both Mao Zedong and Jiang Zemin themselves attached to their own calligraphic prowess as evidence of their 'cultivation and fitness to rule'. It is also clear who is seen to lack *suzhi*: most obviously, China's rural population and its ethnic minorities (pp. 54, 143, 297).

This brings us to a third central issue in the book: the relationship between town and country. This is particularly complex in China due to its size, linguistic diversity, household registration (*hukou*) system and memories of the Cultural Revolution, among other things. Since 2008, the government's goal has been 'integration' (p. 75) of country and city, facilitated by reforms to the *hukou* system, but there remain significant geographical inequalities within China in terms of the educational opportunities available to its people. The supply of teachers, class sizes, the availability of English teaching (pp. 127, 129, 142) – in all these aspects and many more, rural areas are disadvantaged in comparison to China's large cities. Young people from the countryside are much less likely to obtain higher education and are even more unlikely to attend the most prestigious universities; they have lost out in the processes of educational marketization that Vickers and Zeng explain thoroughly in the book. The history and management of the urban–rural relationship has created new problems, such as the existence of an 'ant tribe' (*yi zu*) of young graduates on low incomes living in 'squalid' conditions and causing 'moral panic' among members of older generations

(p. 296). They are generally from rural backgrounds, without *hukou*, and their existence epitomizes the complex relationship between education and society that is the subject of Vickers and Zeng's book.

Education and Society in Post-Mao China is mainly about formal education and its political, social and economic context. Schooling, universities and vocational education are its concern, rather than the large informal sector. Museums – a key site for the development of *suzhi* and for political education – are outside its scope, as are youth movements and organizations, which is perhaps more surprising given the book's cover image. This is understandable: after all, the book is already a long one. However, within the detailed historical and contemporary account of the education systems that it offers, some readers may have preferred a different emphasis in places. With the privileging in the curriculum of an 'urban, Han, male' perspective (p. 142), a more sustained treatment of ethnic minority education might have been provided; it is the urban leadership in and of education that arises time and again throughout the book. Similarly, more attention could perhaps have been paid to the issue of gender, although this does rear its head in various contexts. Of the two students featured in the cover image, one is male and one female – and, interestingly, it is the latter who is clutching the *Technology* book. It is clear that significant gender biases exist within China's education systems, and are sometimes (see, for example, p. 184) explicitly built into them (p. 127).

Vickers and Zeng's book is a pleasure to read and I learned a great deal from it. A clear sense emerges of the sheer scale of educational provision in the world's largest country, and of the range of influences upon and tensions within it. There are some memorable phrases and sentences which nicely encapsulate the importance of education and the examination system in China. To give one example: 'The meritocratic ideal also reinforced a faith in education as a route away from a lifetime shovelling night-soil in the village towards a more fragrant and lucrative career behind a desk' (p. 34). The authors are just as vivid in describing the well-known tendency for teaching to reflect the examinations by which students are assessed: 'contemporary Chinese schools are subject to a veritable backwash tsunami, with the *gaokao* at its epicentre' (p. 182). Occasionally the metaphors come a little too quickly, with a cataract (in the waterfall sense), a carrot and stick, and noses to the grindstone all jostling for position within a couple of sentences (p. 199). Yet this is a readable account – no small achievement given the complexity of the phenomena with which the book is concerned.

As might be expected, Vickers and Zeng pay some attention in their conclusion to the strong performance of Shanghai in the PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) tests. They feel it necessary to 'demystify' (pp. 333–6) this, showing how some of the developments covered in the book are reflected in the educational organization and culture of China's largest city. As they point out elsewhere in the book (p. 133), Shanghai's success is 'largely explained by timetable weighting, hard graft and continuous assessment, rather than by pedagogical wizardry' and, therefore, they conclude in another intriguing metaphor that Shanghai 'is by no means the educational Shangri-La of PISA propaganda' (p. 336).

Education and Society in Post-Mao China is an informative book, which does great service by explaining how, when and why modern Chinese education systems have taken their current form. It is a very important contribution to the recent history of education, and to educational research more widely.