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Getting to Know School as a Window on Contemporary Chinese Society

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Abstract

Schools are major social, economic and political institutions, and schooling is a process affecting the transformation of Chinese society, especially in the process of youth transition to work, employability and labour mobility. Yet this area remains poorly understood and articulated. This study endeavours to generate new knowledge in this field.

The research is a case study with an evaluative perspective on coming to understand today’s Chinese schooling. Given the pivotal role of social milieu and research context in this project, a personalised constructivism-interpretivism methodology is deployed, because it is socially interactive and provides the opportunity for empirical methodological review as part of the process. The study follows an emergent design as it offers not just a contextual relevance but also richness and sensitivity to process what is virtually excluded in methodologies stressing control and experimentation or use of formal instrumentation (Guba & Lincoln, 1982).

The study has two goals. The first, under the umbrella concept of ‘hidden curriculum’, is to focus on characteristics of contemporary Chinese schooling culture. Given that China is a country that is culturally and politically different from Western liberal democracies where fruitful research has been conducted in exploring the sociological functions of education, this contextual idiosyncrasy gives rise to the second goal: to gain a perspective on possible school research cultures through critically reviewing Chinese engagement with sociological and educational research methodology.

The first goal will be accomplished by looking at schooling from a “relational” perspective (Apple, 2012): through relating what happens out of school to that which happens inside school, the research aims to see how schooling answers the call from societal changes initiated by the recent political and economic reforms in China. Specifically, the case study examines the origin of Chinese social and schooling inequality, the function of ideology of meritocracy in the process of China’s recent societal stratification and the reform-reality disconnection in Chinese schools and people’s resultant resignation. Secondly, as a methodological study, this research explores the following four aspects: how the Self’s ontological and epistemological stance determines the power relationship involved in the research process; the political tension involved in social science; the situational and personal principles regarding ethics in indigenous social inquiry; and the generalisation and validity of a singular case such as this research.
Dedication

To people who care about schooling, education, and kids.
Preface or acknowledgements (optional)

There are so many on this PhD journey that I owe my thanks to. Firstly, my family. My son, Haofei, gave me the original motivation; without his arousing my concerns about children of his age, I would not even have thought of learning more about education. Yongliang, my dear husband, has, as always, been supporting me by giving up his own pursuits, when we could only afford one PhD study in the family. And my dear mom and elder brothers and sisters-in-law have all helped me in their own ways. Without them, this PhD study would not have happened.

Saville Kushner and Marek Tesar were my first supervisors. Saville was the one who saw in me some potential to become a researcher and he led me into the field of curriculum study and evaluative inquiry. He widened my vision and taught me, like a father teaching the daughter how to write the first letter, how to research. Marek is a very rigorous scholar and gave excellent comments to help improve my clumsy writing in the first three years. Great thanks.

John Hope and Maureen Legge are my current supervisors. When Saville retired in November 2016, a time when I was intimidated by the fact of losing a supervisor in the final stage of my thesis writing, John, after having a conversation with me and reading my writing, agreed to take me into his team. He is the one who caught me when I was about to fall. Maureen is professional in narrative inquiry and her comments and advice helped me finalise the thesis. Many thanks. I also thank Richard Pringle for helping me find the new supervisors.

I am grateful to several significant figures in the field of curriculum and evaluative research: Rob Walker, Robert Stake, Ernest House and Simons Hellen. They answered my emails, replying to my questions about case study, evaluation, the validity of social inquiry. Ping-Chun Hsiung and Xiangming Chen, both leading figure in Chinese qualitative inquiry, also replied and helped clarify the climate of Chinese social science. I am appreciative of their scholarship.

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Introduction of the Thesis

This is a case study within the tradition of responsive/democratic evaluative enquiry (Stake, 2003; MacDonald, 1978). This study falls under the rubric of naturalistic research and sits within the paradigm of constructivism-interpretivism. The aims of this case-based evaluative inquiry (CBEI) are twofold: on one hand, the study endeavours to understand the changing role of Chinese schooling in socialising Chinese youth to their different futures during times of social change; on the other hand, it explores alternative ways of viewing this socialising process.

When a Chinese person comes to New Zealand to learn how to carry out social and educational research, s/he will be inducted into Western methodology and philosophy. Given that most theories and methodology in the field of educational sociology stem from Western culture and the Western way of perceiving citizenship and individualism, and that any method is rooted in its specific historical, cultural and socio-political context (Gobo, 2011, p. 1), this raises the question of how well Western knowledge and theories can work when s/he goes back to research in the local context. In essence, this is an issue of the politics of knowledge: which is to be prioritised in the study, Western theory or Chinese local research context? Theories teaching how to do research or research actions in the fieldwork? Authority from the curriculum theorists or perspectives from the curriculum practitioners involved in the research?

Being fully aware of this, I resort to the strategy behind CBEI. Evaluative inquiry is selected due to its power sharing ethos devoted to social and curriculum study; case study is chosen for the advantages that it can promise for a study imbued with uncertainty: eclecticism for a personalised methodology. The CBEI strategy underpins a fieldwork style involving ‘progressive focusing’, the seminal concept of Parlett and Hamilton (1972). This strategy first of all resonates with Chinese cultural beliefs of learning by using real contexts and learning with appropriate adaptation and flexibility (Chen, 2016, p. 72). Secondly, the strategy is also in accordance with my own experience of being a classroom teacher, from which experience has grown ‘the pragmatic perspective’ (Dewey, 2015; Rorty, 1982); that is, this research pays due respect to the practitioner’s voices. Last and most importantly, this strategy pays attention to the politics of knowledge in Chinese Social Science Inquiry (CSSI), specifically...
the existing hierarchy in both the domestic and the global community of social science inquiry (Hsuing, 2015, 2016).

This strategy demands a research design which is highly emergent because the hypotheses or issues are not pre-specified by the investigators. The research questions here emerge through the process and are shaped by the enquiry, instead of being pre-set: it is what is happening within those ‘boundaries’ of the case that determines what the study is about. In addition, an emergent research design goes along with the nature of this research which attaches supreme importance to contingency relations in context (Kushner, 2017).

Out of this research strategy and design, the boundary of the case can only be found after a process of theorising (Swedberg, 2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016; Kushner, 2017) and the methodology defined after the fieldwork. The research, therefore, is a process of boundary exploration of the case studied and the methodology summarises what I have done, rather than what I plan to do in the field. All things considered, the thesis is structured according to the process of conducting this CBEI. Apart from the Introduction and Conclusion, the thesis consists of three sections.

Section one has three main threads woven into the background fabric: personal rationale and the research background, the research questions and a literature review, and a justification for the methodological option. Chapter One offers a research rationale including a prudent inward study of Self and the research background. This aims to clarify who I am as a researcher, what kind of experience I have had with the school life of Chinese youth, from which the research interest originates, and the background for this research. Chapter Two explains how the research questions were shaped through examining the gap between the Western theories and the Chinese context in terms of educational sociological study and summarises what theories I had studied before the fieldwork. Chapter Three looks at the appropriate research strategy. This involves an inspection of the challenges arising from the present politics of knowledge and how the CBEI model seems proper for this study.

Section Two is the fieldwork report. This includes not merely the data but also the process and experience of how the data were collected. In chronological order, Chapter Four tells the process and experience of obtaining access to the field school, demonstrating how Chinese local customs and traditions work in the field of Chinese social science inquiry.
Chapter Five depicts the context: M City is viewed against the background of significant social change in contemporary China; the local primary schooling enrolment policies are highlighted; and the contour of the campus layout of M Secondary School is presented.

Chapter Six focuses on the daily life of M School: the data are collected from almost every campus corner available: dormitory life, the “sign in” scene at the school gate, anecdotes in the lounge area, the flag-raising ceremony, sports time and the library.

Chapter Seven focuses on the multi-dimensional reconstruction of classroom life of Class 6, Year 10. It includes all the main events of a schooling semester, a punctilious description of the layout and decoration of the classroom, the classroom culture, and most important, a dimension of relationships involved in the research, for example, the student to teacher, student to student, student to parent and the researcher to participant relationships.

Chapter Eight and Nine present interview data consisting mainly of talks from individual participants: two students, one teacher, one member of school management and one school gatekeeper. The interviewees are selected based on the fieldwork observation and the interviews are largely led by the interviewees.

Chapter Ten includes several pieces of data in the form of documentation under the theme of pinggu—the Chinese authoritarian assessment and evaluation in schooling life.

Section Three is a discussion and analysis comprising two foci: one for the hidden curriculum in today’s Chinese schooling, and the other for methodology of the constructivism evaluative case study. Due to the nature of an emergent research design, the analysis and discussion here is issues-oriented, led and driven by problems and puzzles arising from the fieldwork.

Chapter Eleven, with a centrality of local context, focuses on the social function of contemporary Chinese schooling, and the theories generated here can fall under the umbrella concept of ‘hidden curriculum’, for it attempts to unravel the complex nexus involved in how schooling answers the call from societal changes initiated by the recent political and economic reforms in China. Several mini cases serve as examples: the left-behind children (LBC) and schooling enrolment policy, meritocracy and schooling losers, and reform-reality disconnection and resignation.

Chapter Twelve offers a critical review of the applicability of the CBEI model within the CSSI climate. Led by practical issues from the fieldwork, this chapter discusses four issues: firstly, how the Self’s ontological and epistemological stance determines the power
relationship involved in the research process; secondly, the issue of political tension that is involved when methodological individualism is applied in a social science climate demanding political loyalty; thirdly, through its discussion it makes efforts to justify the situational and personal principles regarding ethics in indigenous social inquiry; and lastly, it presents justification for the generalisability and validity of this research.
SECTION ONE: Introduction of the Research

Chapter One: Research Rationale and Background

1.1. Why This Research

Malterud (2001, pp. 483-484) says that “a researcher’s background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions”. I agree and believe it helpful that the reader know about my personal rationale behind this inquiry. I also agree that for case study, there may be no particular moment when data gathering begins. It may begin long before there is commitment to do the study: backgrounding, acquaintance with other cases, first impressions. It is also possible that “a considerable proportion of all data is impressionistic, picked up informally as the researcher first becomes acquainted with the case. Many of these early impressions will later be refined or replaced, but the pool of data includes the earliest of observations” (Stake, 1995, p. 49). This first chapter is therefore a study of myself: who I am and what experiences constitute my first impressions towards this case study. This is a piece of narrative interweaving personal experiences and reflections with news reports and definitions to help understand the context of the research and why I chose it as a topic requiring more investigation.

1.1.1 A Chinese mother’s concern

“I got 39 in my English test, I very much regretted not following Grandma’s advice, I will review for at least two or three hours before the test next time...”

This is, unfortunately, not a diary of Xiaojun, a ten-year-old Year 5 boy, but rather his farewell to this world. He hanged himself on 18 November 2014, after having written those words in his homework exercise book. Several media sources reported this on 22 November, 2014. Xinhuanet titled its report “The student’s suicide for the sake of a low test paper score: a signal that should not be ignored”. The website showed five comments following this news (Xinhuanet, 2014).
We soon ignore a news story as it is quickly overwhelmed by other news; it is nothing new in China and people do not talk and argue much about one boy's life, although the official figure for primary student suicides is 76 in 2013 (Xinhuanet, 2014). No other report follows, probably because people can easily imagine what might follow: the parents heard that Xiaojun was punished in the school; the school clarified that Xiaojun was asked to stand up, with some other naughty students in the classroom, for about ten minutes, with good reason; then a negotiation would be conducted between the family and school over how much money the school, mainly out of humanitarian considerations, can pay the family for the loss. An unwritten understanding is that the school is willing to pay more if the family agrees to settle the problem behind the closed doors.


I am particularly sensitive to these events because, above all, I am a mother, a Chinese mother with only one child, and those deceased are more or less the same age as my son. Scientifically, or statistically, it seems unrealistic to relate this negligible digit (the figure of child suicide due to schooling pressure) to the quality of schooling, but personally, as a mother and a teacher, I feel guilty. Driven by this respect of “Self”, I choose to present this as a datum for my work, which might be the most I can do for children. Here is part of my appeal to House’s third principle of validity: justice.

Our central government has been working on reducing schooling pressures for young students for decades, and there have been numerous national educational policies and curriculum reforms implemented. Why do they not work? It has been worrying that “the research on children’s suicide seems to be hidden, labelled as taboo” (Lan, 2015) and it is hard to find any up-to-date statistics on child suicide numbers (Li, 2014). But what becomes depressing is that people appear to have been convinced that there is no option other than the schooling system we have now. One reality for China is the huge population, and, therefore, there is a feeling of ‘what can we do?’ Facing a seemingly hopeless situation, people accept that it is the way things are. I feel unsettled as I research this thesis.
What is happening in Chinese schooling? Do we not have the “best” education? After all, Shanghai tops the triennial PISA\(^1\) rankings (Programme for International Student Assessment by OECD) (Ringmar, 2013) if the quality is to be measured by standardised test; but other people argue that we have the “worst” education (Zhao, 2014), because the examination-driven system may result in narrowing education to measurable outcomes at the expense of other important educational focuses such as physical, moral, civic and artistic developments (Andrews, 2014). From where should we look for the quality of education? Who has the right to set the criteria for that quality? These have been haunting and gradually modifying my thinking.

Born in 1970s, I grew up in the post-Cultural Revolution era in China and have in the last twenty years seen the prosperous development of my country: we held the 2008 Olympics in Beijing; we hosted the 2010 Expo in Shanghai; and we took the lead in the world in consuming luxury products (evidence is strong that nowadays China does not seem poor anymore).

There were, however, several striking moments where I had experienced a change in this belief. Hearing of the school casualties resulting from the Sichuan earthquake was probably the first moment. The earthquake happened on May 12, 2008; measuring 8.0 M, it is the 21st deadliest earthquake of all time. In terms of school casualties, thousands of school children died, due to shoddy construction. Details of school casualties have been the subject of nongovernmental investigation since December 2008 by volunteers, and the Chinese government has seen erosion in confidence over the school construction scandals.

Being a mother and a teacher, I was shocked by Li Cheng Peng’s blog on his experience during the Sichuan earthquake in 2008. As a prominent soccer commentator for Chinese TV, Li wrote about how the experience of travelling to the area devastated by the earthquake changed his attitude toward his country:

\[I\text{ } couldn’t\text{ } understand\text{ } why\text{ } the\text{ } rubble\text{ } of\text{ } a\text{ } brand\text{ } new\text{ } five-storey\text{ } building\text{ } covered\text{ } half\text{ } the\text{ } area\text{ } of\text{ } a\text{ } basketball\text{ } court\text{ } while\text{ } nearby\text{ } structures\text{ } built\text{ } decades\text{ } ago\text{ } were\text{ } still\text{ } standing…. \text{ } But\text{ } my\text{ } patriotism\text{ } began\text{ } to\text{ } come\text{ } into\text{ } question\text{ } as\text{ } I\text{ } stood\text{ } in\text{ } front\text{ } of\text{ } the\text{ }\]

\(^1\)The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a worldwide study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in member and non-member nations of 15-year-old school pupils’ scholastic performance in mathematics, science and reading. It was first performed in 2000 and then repeated every three years, aiming at testing literacy in three competence fields: reading, mathematics and science, on a 1000-point scale.
ruins of Beichuan High School. It became clear that the (foreign/Western) “imperialists” did not steal the reinforced steel bars from the concrete used to make our schools. Our school children were not killed by foreign devils. Instead, they were killed by the filthy hands of my own people. (Li, 2012)

Then there was the series of school bus tragedies: people had, by November 2011, seen school bus crashes in at least six locations in China in that year alone, and hundreds of young children died (2011, Nov 16, news.sohu.com). Across all the victims, 74% were rural children (2011, Nov 21, guangdong.eol.cn). The latest one, on 11 November 2011, was the most appalling: the bus, originally a nine-seater van, was carrying 62 children between three and five years old, and two adults, when it crashed head-on with a truck in northwest Gansu province (2011, Nov 11, eol.cn; 2011, Nov 17, news.gd.sina.com.cn; 2011, Nov 21, usatoday.com; 2011, Nov 21, voanews.com). Some media commentators expressed their sadness over this Chinese school bus accident euphemistically (2011, Nov 11, eol.cn; 2011, Nov 17, news.gd.sina.com.cn).

Are we taking good care of our youth? Our economic reform is seen as fruitful, but most of the benefits seem staying outside of the schools.

1.1.2. A teacher’s confusion

If these events are second-hand stories, what is going on around me in daily life also looks perplexing. I am from a teacher’s family and I myself became a classroom teacher, and this experience has engendered in me a lasting concern about quality, equality and equity in the field of schooling and education. I previously firmly believed in meritocracy in Chinese schooling—education is supposed to be a path for upward social mobility. Most people still do; and evidence can be found in the fact we have gaokao factory schools in China.

Gaokao, also known as The National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), is an academic examination held annually in the People’s Republic of China. Gaokao was interrupted by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution decade (1966–1976) when the political background of a student’s family became the only criterion for admission to university, and academic performance and potential were not considerations; it was resumed in 1977. Currently, it is a set of nationwide joint examinations taken by high school graduates in their last year of senior high school in China, and there has been no age restriction since 2001.

Gaokao factory schools are a product of the situation where gaokao is almost the sole factor in college application decisions, and the test is only given once a year. These ‘cram schools’
are semi-military schools where the students must obey a strict set of rules and regulations. Students are required to study more than 15 hours per day and almost 7 days per week. This schooling prepares students exclusively for gaokao.

Gaokao in China has been seen as the fairest means for upward social mobility, but this seems to be changing. On 13 April 2015, under the title of “Some People: Born Richer, Smarter, AND WORK HARDER!” (Li, 2015), Yatai Daily News published its report on the brilliant achievement of Miss K, the only daughter of one of the rising elites in Chinese politics and economy. Yatai Daily News is an affiliate of Xinhua News Agency, which functions as an agent for government propagation of information in China. What might have been unexpected is a troubling blog piece linking Miss K and those hard-working students from gaokao factory schools. The title is “How many years of hard work do children from Hengshui High School have to put in, before they can find themselves drinking coffee at the same table as people like Miss K?” (Author unknown, 2015). By presenting the image of high school students from Hengshui who work 15 hours daily in the classrooms, this dares Miss K’s diligence and suggests the previous report by Yatai to be a deplorable bigotry to blame people’s mediocrity in individual development on their not being hard working enough.

This blog was quickly and widely reprinted and re-posted by many people, probably because it tells the real story of the relationship between individual accomplishment and family background: while people of Hengshui are working in the classroom for around 15 hours a day and 7 days a week, people like Miss K have travelled all over the world through Summer Schools. While people of Hengshui are memorising English vocabulary at the dinner table, people like Miss K have been able to appreciate Shakespeare.

Hengshui High School comes into focus again (it previously attracted media attention for its semi-military management style), this time for its widely publicised cage-like “anti-suicide” barriers to prevent stressed students jumping to their deaths. Two students at the school have already killed themselves by April of the school year 2015, supposedly due to the mounting pressure (Wu, 2015; Sumitra, 2015; Han and Cao, 2015; Phillips, 2015). Though hard working, as such, people of Hengshui cannot be like Miss K.

To me, this dual reality has become a metaphor connoting certain ongoing changes in today’s China: a refreshed social stratification with an emerging class of social elites. Sociologically, China had not moved far along the path of socialist egalitarianism, because in the short space
of 30 years, China has transformed from being one of the most egalitarian countries to being one of the most unequal (Wang & Hu, 1999; Zhou & Qin, 2012). The Gini coefficient in China increased from 0.16 before 1978 to 0.47 in 2007, compared with 0.25 for Japan, 0.37 for India, and 0.41 for the United States in the same year (UNDP, 2005 and Asian Development Bank, 2007). Three decades of capitalism-oriented reform in China has caused substantial societal stratification, creating a class structure similar to that of many capitalist-authoritarian regimes where elite reproduction occurs.

My interest lies in the changing role of schooling in contemporary China and this requires me to reflect seriously on what it means for me to be a teacher and, thereby, what it means to research schooling and classrooms.

I have been teaching English in a Chinese university, but, I feel, by eviscerating the language—I mainly teach grammar, syntax and vocabulary in order to assist and push students to pass various tests. I do not know when or how I gradually lost my already very limited control over what I could choose to teach; I teach as instructed, following “scripts” that test-makers deem as “skills” that must be taught in order that students will be ready for the world of work. Whenever there is a chance that I might be able to try to broaden my students’ vision, by sharing some values and traditions from Western culture, there is always an alarming voice buzzing in my mind: Do they need to know about this? These are not tested! Besides, what kind of Western value am I allowed to disseminate in the classroom in China as I teach English Language? Is it helpful to confine the students to the censored story? “What knowledge is of most worth” (Pinar, 2012, p. 210)? The idea that my hard work might be doing my students a disservice is frustrating.

In summary, there have been some dreadful incidents that have occurred, and with them departed the typical Chinese patriot in me, and in its place came the seed of doubt and confusion. In retrospect, I see myself going through a stage of crisis, probably one of “legitimation” for the changing role of schooling and the teacher during social change. If asked exactly when and how my interest in this study started, all I can say is that there seems

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2The term Gini coefficient was developed by the Italian statistician and sociologist Corrado Gini. It is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent the income distribution of a nation’s residents, and is the most commonly used measure of inequality. By this mechanism, it measures the inequality among values of a frequency distribution. It is said that a Gini coefficient of zero expresses perfect equality, where all values are the same; while Gini coefficient of 1 (or 100%) expresses maximal inequality among values. [Gini, C. (1912). Variabilità e mutabilità. Reprinted in Memorie di metodologica statistica (Ed. Pizetti E, Salvemini). Rome: Libreria Eredi Virgilio Veschi. 1. Gini, C. (1997). Concentration and dependency ratios. Rivista di Politica Economica, 87, 769-792.]
to have been an accumulating process, by the end of which I was bewildered. It is out of the
dense welter of a sense of crisis, perplexities, worries and concerns, curiosity and interest,
and with some pristine perception of the amorphous flux of the social function of schooling
that my desire grew to quest for a better understanding of nowadays Chinese society and
schooling.

I began my PhD studies in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of
Auckland on 1 October 2013. The reasons for my resorting to the Western institute are more
than one, but the key reason can be found in the concurrent situation of Chinese educational
study.

1.2. The Research Background

China is known for her long history and rich cultural traditions from which Chinese ancient
educational philosophy originated. However, due to the foreign invasion and domestic
political turmoil in the last two centuries, the development of curriculum study and sociology
as academic disciplines in modern China had undergone several ruptures and upheavals. For
this research I believe it important to have a historical reflection of ancient curriculum
wisdom, the growth of curriculum study in modern China and the challenges for sociological
study in education. It aims to depict a comprehensive picture of the research background.

1.2.1. Ke Cheng—Confucianism and curriculum wisdom

By etymological study, Ke Cheng is the Chinese term for curriculum (Zhang, 2008, p. 338)
and it first appeared in the text of Confucianism. Chinese Ke Cheng is directly related to the
great way of 礼/Li (rites) and 音/Yue (music), with 仁/Ren (benevolence) as its core. In
Confucian culture, temple and rites and music are all interrelated. Temple stands for the
physical culture; rites and music describe the spiritual culture. Rites and music are the content
of the temple; the temple is the embodiment and symbol of rites and music. Both have their
own intrinsic laws or working “way”. Ke Cheng, therefore, means the working way of the
temple or rites and music, and their construction or process of creation.

It is believed that Ke Cheng was first introduced to schools and made the content that was
taught by teachers and learned by students by Zhu Xi (1130–1200 C. E.), one of the best-
known Confucians in China. The concept of education was defined by Confucian in The
Doctrine of the Mean: What is endowed by heaven is called the nature; to follow that nature
is called the way; to cultivate the way is called education. In Zhu Xi’s view, implementing
curriculum (Ke Cheng) means esteeming morality and doing inquiry learning. The development of moral virtues is to pursue goodness and benevolence through everyday practice and self-development, thus the end of education is to guide people to pursue moral perfection in realising the life that performs goodness and benevolence. In sum, moral creativity is the essence of a Confucian curriculum (Zhang, 2008, p. 328).

Grounded in the Confucianist pursuit of the “unity between heaven and man”, Confucian sociology of curriculum is based on the sociology of Mean–harmony through cultivating people’s morality with education. As a result, according to Confucianism, curriculum is a moral event, therefore curriculum research is a values-laden process. Every aspect of curriculum process and curriculum research is soaked in values and moral elements. To build a harmonious society and eventually reach the state of unity between heaven and man is consequently the basic and ultimate aim of curriculum research and curriculum process. Pinar (1995) comments that this is quite different from various conflicting sociologies of curriculum in the Western world.

1.2.2. The germination and ruptures of curriculum study in modern China

Educational study as a discipline came to China only around 100 years ago. Educational philosophy in China during the twentieth century had gone through a tortuous journey of social changes, suffering several upheavals (Jin & Dan, 2004; Lu & Chi, 2007; Zhang, 2008).

Education study in modern China germinated with the introduction of Western philosophy of education (1900–1949). John Dewey’s pragmatism, in particular, caused major changes in the minds of philosophers of education as well as educational practitioners and was believed to have brought about a transformation of the Chinese school system in 1920s and 1930s. Dewey’s theory of democratic education was considered as a mechanism for achieving a long-awaited new society in China. It was in this context that many experimental schools and new initiatives sprang up at that time. As Dewey stayed a whole year in China and his Chinese students, such as Hu Shi and Tao Xingzhi, successfully introduced his ideas into China, it is hard to deny that his thoughts played an important role in the development of the Chinese education system and educational theories.

Chinese academics also tried to develop their own philosophy of education while absorbing Western philosophy in this period. In China, the first book of philosophy of education was published in the 1920s, and it was a remarkable step in the emergence of modern Chinese philosophy of education. Curriculum research in China accomplished substantial
achievements and became a conspicuous, relatively independent research field during this period. Unfortunately, this tradition did not continue, due to the Japanese invasion and the Second World War (1931-1945).

At the early time of founding the state, due to the revolutionary spirit of Marxism and the tension between Marxism and capitalism, Marxist ideas were considered to be the sole guideline for education after 1949. In education, Marxist socialist theory underpinned the moral education that indoctrinated a collectivist moral code, which coincides with traditional Confucianism.

Following the Soviet Union from the 1950s to the early 1960s, China built up a highly centralised socialist system. Under this system, education was regarded simply as social superstructure, so it had no independence and could function only as the mouthpiece of economics, the loudspeaker of politics, and the defender of culture. Curriculum administration was also centralised and managed by bureaucracy through a unified teaching plan, syllabus and textbook. The principals and teachers in elementary and secondary schools had no power to make curriculum decisions. Because curriculum was developed by central government, it was unnecessary for others to explore its value orientations and principles of design. Curriculum research in China consequently declined, but what followed was worse and curriculum research in China almost became extinct in the second half of the twentieth century (Jin & Dan, 2004, p. 573)

In 1966, The Cultural Revolution was launched by Mao Zedong, the then Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). It was a socio-political movement that took place in mainland China and lasted for a decade. Its stated goal was to preserve true Communist ideology in the country by purging remnants of capitalist and traditional elements from Chinese society. Not surprisingly, there was only one kind of educational theory available, grounded in the ideology of ‘class struggle’. It was a hegemony that circumscribed educational studies in China. During this period, both Chinese traditional philosophy and Western philosophy were criticised, downgraded and suppressed (for the criticism of pragmatism in China at this time, see Wang, C., 2002). As a result, when curriculum studies blossomed in the Western world, the achievement had been prevented from coming into China for almost 30 years. The tradition of Chinese curriculum research in the first half of the twentieth century was also discarded.
Education study in mainland China was reborn after China opened up to the world in the late 1970s. After a long period of rupture from the Confucian tradition and from Western philosophy of education, China in the 1980s saw the renaissance of education study where Chinese scholars combined Confucian tradition and Western philosophy of education with a reconceptualisation of Marxist educational ideas (Fu & Zhang, 1986; Jin & Dan, 2004). In addition to that, a great many papers and books on philosophy of education have been published (Yu, S, 1996; Fan & Shang, 1999; Lu & Chi, 2003). Unfortunately, most of them are confined to either the translation of Western thinking, or interpretation of the government reform policies in schooling, with a great deal left unexplored in the field of sociology in education.

1.2.3. The recent rehabilitation of curriculum and sociological study in China

Also impacted by political events, curriculum study in China before the year 2000 stayed on the level of theorising and analysing historical educational thinking instead of focusing on emerging problems in a changing and transforming schooling. Most curriculum study stayed on the level of policy analysis until 2013. Huang (2004) discussed the main goals and strategies in the process of Chinese curriculum reform policies. Zhou and Zhu (2007) provided not just a comprehensive introduction to the Chinese educational system and educational reforms but also a discussion on problems such as “demands for more diversified strategies in curriculum reform implementation”, “more curriculum resource”, “teachers’ further training” and “prevalent examination-driven practice”. In addition, there have been many other researchers focusing on pedagogical practice and the efficiency of certain pedagogical patterns measured through objective tests. Regrettably, these research failed to raise voices from stakeholders of schooling life, giving no attention to voices from the students and parents and showing little concern for the practitioner’s perspective, the student’s and teacher’s perspective in particular, towards the reform and implementation of the curriculum.

It is fortunate that due to the demand for understanding modern Chinese curriculum, more recent studies have signaled a new upsurge. Chinese scholars have begun to highlight the complexity of the power relationship in curriculum development and draw attention to the need to improved understandings of school power in Chinese context. “Curriculum control”, “Forms of knowledge”, “Ideology and curriculum change”, “Teachers and the classroom” and “Culture and the curriculum” are the main topics covered in Curriculum Innovations in Changing Societies (Law & Li, 2013). The research by Ye (2014, 2015) is worthy of more
attention. From the perspective of school-based curriculum development and moral education, Ye critically evaluated the tensions involved in the power distribution in decision-making over the development and implementation in China’s school-based curriculum in middle school. Ye’s work looks intriguing to me because it provides a school-based curriculum case study and gives consideration to some stakeholders’ daily schooling experience. Moreover, *Curriculum Studies in China* (Pinar, 2014) reveals not just how curriculum scholars in China understand their field’s intellectual history, its present circumstances, but also thought on the relations among these intersecting domains within globalisation.

What has also become apparent is the pernicious influence of the historical and political events in China on the sociological study of curriculum. Sociology in contemporary China is also inchoate due to having been banned from China’s universities and research centres for nearly thirty years prior to the 1980s. Sociology was introduced into China from the end of the nineteenth century, and its popularity reached a peak in the 1930s and 1940s with a proliferation of surveys and research projects both in urban and rural areas. At the start of the 1950s, after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the discipline was suppressed in universities and research institutes. In 1957, the movement against right-wing elements violently denounced the discipline as a bourgeois science and condemned its representatives, who had appealed during the Hundred Flowers campaign for sociology to be revived. The act of re-creating the discipline took place in March 1979, with Deng Xiaoping’s “We must rapidly catch up” speech, followed by the appeal by Hu Qiaomu, President of the new Academy of Social Sciences, to recreate institutions and re-embark on research.

Sociologists, such as Fei Xiaotong, were rehabilitated and charged with re-establishing the discipline. The ‘theory of state centralism’ and the ‘indigenous’ view were the two paradigms that dominated the social research on China prior to the year 2000 (Sun, 2000). The former stressed a top-down control exerted from the political authorities over society, favouring analysis of the structures of domination and the apparatus of the State and the Party; the latter emphasised the predominance of phenomena of social resistance, in reaction to this totalitarian paradigm.

Sun Liping, a former Director of Tsinghua’s new Sociology Department, who influenced by the work of Pierre Bourdieu, takes a position that focuses attention not on static structures but on practices and interactions envisaged in a dynamic way. Faced with a particular Chinese context of transition towards a market economy, but with the political structures unaltered
(Merle, 2004), Sun and his colleagues have developed the concept of “the sociology of practice” as a “formula for research” of “communist civilisation” (Sun, 2000). This practice-centred perspective incites in-depth observation of the events and practices of daily life in the Chinese context while maintaining an advanced theoretical approach, for example from the West.

While endeavouring to gain the capacity to tackle the real problems of Chinese society and to establish a constructive dialogue with contemporary social theory, Sun and Guo introspectively considered the issue with this specialisation, pondering on the danger of “a diminishing awareness of the real problems of Chinese society”; also questioned was the import of concepts produced in the West and their use to describe a Chinese context (Merle, 2004), given that it has been observed that the notion of ‘community’ as it is used today in China has nothing to do with the communities observed by sociologists in the United States (Shen, 2003).

To sum up, this background conveys several messages: the heritage from ancient Chinese philosophers in the field of education may be rich, but the ancient wisdom may not be apt to interpreting the growing complexity of the undergoing changes in today’s China. In spite of Chinese scholars’ endeavours to build the study of curriculum and sociology as independent disciplines, foreign invasions and domestic turmoil ruptured the rehabilitation. It is fortunate that the last three decades have seen the rebirth of the disciplines of curriculum and sociological study in modern China, but Chinese scholars still need to learn from the well-established and developed social science in the West, for both economical and socio-political reforms have produced some blatant problems in modern Chinese society. These problems include the deteriorating educational equality, the quality of schooling, and the changing roles of today’s school, the existence of personal agency, hidden curriculum study and appropriate curriculum methodological discussion to capture the increasing complexity in schooling. The idiosyncrasy of Chinese context deserves highlighting when it is to interpret social problems in China.
Chapter Two: The Research Questions and Literature Review

2.1. Research Questions and the Significance of the Research

Based on the account of contemporary Chinese sociological thinking and curriculum study, this study proposes research under two general themes:

1. To look at the complex process of sorting Chinese youth for a stratified labour market through a study of hidden curriculum, with a focus on the interaction between what happens outside and inside of the school.

2. To evaluate the applicability of the introduced research methods in a Chinese context of social inquiry.

Specifically, for the first research theme, I consider the following questions arising out of Western theories: Do Chinese children fail in their schooling due to a lack of “elaborated codes” of language (Bernstein, 1971, pp. 61-66), particularly if they are from a “working class culture” (Willis, 1977)? While being a source of professional and institutional pride, can these codes exclude children from academic success? Have Chinese schools become a “field” where “different forms of capitals” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) can be legitimately and invisibly convertible? Have we also come to the stage where the economic status of parents—rather than effort at school or educational achievement—is the best predictor of their children’s future economic status (Bowles & Gintis, 1976)? What are the educational complexities that Chinese teachers face in classrooms (Smith & Geoffrey, 1968)? Do we have “resistance” (Giroux, 1983) and “contestation” (Apple, 2012) in our schooling? The above questions can fall into the rubric of ‘hidden curriculum’: What will a Chinese version of ‘life in classrooms’ (Jackson, 1968) look like? And how does the ‘hidden curriculum’ work to foster hegemony in a Communist civilisation, which seems to “dominate by consent” (Gramsci, 1971)?

The second theme is methodology oriented. Through the methodological quest I am keen to explore the process of power-sharing fieldwork grounded in constructivism. This aims to add to the profile of locally situated research experience through recording the fieldwork process while exploring possible issues in terms of epistemology, methodology, ethics, validity and generalisation. In the quest of schooling life in the Chinese context, for example, in a
‘communist civilisation’ and authoritarian culture where the one-party government tends to value a universal objective truth, how will the presumption work that ‘reality’ may understandably vary dramatically not merely among policymakers, principals, teachers, students and parents, but among individuals of the same group? How well will the Western protocol of doing a collaborative social inquiry be accepted in the Chinese field where there might be a different set of ethics? What can validate constructivist social research and what can be generated from this study?

These questions, however, should be provisional prior to entering the field and discovering what the practical problems might be. To thoroughly understand the case and to enrich knowledge about daily schooling in ‘communist civilisation’, progressive focusing tends to be pivotal in this research. This actually requires the researcher to live with uncertainty, and the original research problems may turn out to be interim. The research can ride on a curiosity towards the applicability of Western theories of educational sociology in the Chinese context, but it might be uncertain where it will end, because it is very likely that this research concept may not be familiar to the participants. Once the fieldwork starts, there exists a possibility that all the previously described important prior research, eminent scholars, prominent theories and so forth, turn out to be unheard of by Chinese middle school teachers, students and parents, and even to the principals. They may have their respective particular concerns which await discovery.

Under the circumstances, “if early questions are not working, if new issues become apparent, the design (of case study) is changed” (Stake, 1995, p. 9). For example, the mission of this research is to add knowledge to help improve practitioners’ daily practice, and as a consequence, the practitioners’ view will be crucial for a reformed or reshaped research focus. It is, however, practicable that people may have found the Chinese orientation towards testing guilty of suppressing the capacity of youth for independent and critical thinking; but when asked for any innovative cure for this, people may prefer to maintain the status quo, using the excuse of a Chinese national imperative—a large population with limited resources. This consciousness, which may be false, also seems intriguing enough and worthy of exploring, because people choose to forget how rich the government showed itself to the world when, in 2008, through the Beijing Olympic Games and in 2012, the Shanghai World Expo. The research focus, correspondingly, may shift to the people’s reaction, in communist civilisation, towards the predicament they face in education, or why Chinese people are willing to be submissive and compliant, and is education playing a role in this, and if yes, how?
Alternatively, under high test-oriented schooling, Chinese schools will continue to produce large numbers of docile, obedient and manageable workers; what kind of tomorrow, then, will the increasingly globalised international labour market face? Or, when the Chinese government tries to transform an economic development model from “produced in China” to “developed or invented in China”, is today’s schooling a driving or an inert dragging force in relation to that strategic target?

Though uncertainty exists for this research and the study consequence is unpredictable, the study is important. This research will add new colours to the research landscape, aiming to enrich public knowledge and discourse of the social function of school curriculum in contemporary China.

First of all, Chinese schooling process deserves urgent and scrupulous attention because of the role it is playing in the emergence of new forms of relationship in the workplace, and in society and politics, in an era of globalisation. Many researches have been conducted to document an emerging social stratification (Walder, 1989a; Davis, 1995; Bian & Logan, 1996; Nee, 1996; Liang, 1997; Wu & Xu, 1997; He, 1993, 1998; Goodman, 1996, 2000; Bian, 2002; Alvin, 2003; Chen, 2003; Anagnost, 2008; Li, 2011) and the increasing inequality in education together with unexpected social problems brought about by higher education expansion (Wei & Li et al., 2000; Yang, 2004; Wan, 2006; Yang, 2006; Xiang & Wei, 2009; Freeman, 2009; Yao et al., 2010; Meng et al., 2010; Li et al., 2011). However, there is a dearth of research that studies the role of schooling in the process of social change within a relational perspective. This research attempts to relate what is going on inside schools to that outside schools, thus making transparent the possible failures in fairly redistributing social public resources in a Chinese context. This will benefit not only the decision-maker in curriculum reform by revealing curriculum impact at the macro-social level, it may also prove useful to management of schooling institutions, as well as teaching staff, students and parents through what Stake and Trumbull (1980) have called naturalistic generalisation—that is, a process of gaining insight through recognising and by associating the fieldwork experience to their own experience.

Secondly, efforts to understand the dynamics and complexity in the interlacing of Western and Eastern culture in curriculum study also deserves highlighting. In this globalising era where China emerges as a world power, both the international community and China itself need to deepen their mutual understanding (Jacques, 2012; Obama, 2009). This area is,
however, frequently complained about and is still under-researched in both Chinese and English-medium literature. Given that “schools are living proof of the survival of our cultural patterns” (Kushner, 2010), curriculum study tends to be an optimum arena for this exploration. By learning what appropriate school-based educational research looks like through the lens of Western theories and methodology that is responsive to Chinese culture and politics, this research will contribute new knowledge to better mutual understanding between the West and East.

The last but most substantial and difficult contribution to be made is methodological. Following the strategy of case-based evaluative inquiry (CBEI), this research deploys a personally constructed methodology focused on the daily experiences of “real people struggling with real stuff in real settings”, including students, teachers and parents (Patton, 2000). The rationale behind the research is a new individualism sought-after by democratic/responsive researchers: an assertion of personal agency that makes social life unpredictable, determined more in action than in a theory which rested for its validity on stable institutions. A heightened awareness of the researcher’s self-subjectivity, a shift of generalisation accountability from the researcher to the researched or reader, capacity for capturing certain hidden data during an interview: all are part of the ethos of narrative inquiry within a humanistic and naturalistic perspective but all are demanding in the Chinese context where there is a lack of familiarity with this methodological pursuit.

2.2. Literature Review

Out of the research background and the emergent nature of specific research questions, this inquiry needs at least two literature reviews. Included here is the first review that comes before entering the field, aiming to inform myself of the main themes from Western educational sociology, but not aiming at having my fieldwork framed into the reviewed themes and theories. The second part of review will come after the fieldwork and it aims to facilitate interpreting and understanding the issues the field data unfold.

What is included in this chapter, therefore, is a review of several themes and theories developed in the West in the field of educational sociology. This is driven by my concerns and confusion, out of which comes my eagerness to understand and make public the role of schooling in time of dramatic social change; that is, how schools function given the newly emerging social stratification that has become gradually entrenched over the last two decades in China.
This review starts from theories in the field of curriculum. Curriculum here takes its broad definition, meaning the totality of schooling experiences that occur in the educational process; curriculum theories are about knowledge taught in schools, teaching and learning process and schooling assessment. The review continues with theories in the field of educational sociology—a discipline concerned with the social function of schools. This review ends with some recent epistemological perspectives in educational study. This arrangement, following my learning trajectory, aims to lay a foundation for my methodological deployment.

2.2.1. Curriculum theories

To understand schooling's social function requires the knowledge of what happens in the process of teaching and learning in school and how to understand this process.

From a historical perspective, the word “curriculum” was observed as having been first mentioned in Western university records in 1582 (Hamilton, 1989, p. 71), and in more recent times Western scholars have developed many definitions of this concept: Armstrong, 1989; Bestor, 1956; Bell, 1971; Bobbit, 1918; Caswell & Campbell, 1935; Doll, 1988; Duncan & Frymier, 1967; Goodman, 1963; Harnack, 1968; Hass, 1980; Hutchins, 1936; Johnson, 1967; Krug, 1957; Musgrave, 1968; Oliva, 1989; Oliver, 1977; Phenix, 1962; Saylor, Alexander & Lewis, 1974; Shaver & Berlak, 1968; Smith, 1957; Smith & Orlovsky, 1978; Taba, 1962; Tanner & Tanner, 1988; Tyler, 1957; Walker, 1990; Wiles & Bondi, 1989. Listed below are several representative definitions of curriculum:

The curriculum is all of the learning of students which is planned by and directed by the school to attain its educational goals (Tyler, 1957).

The curriculum is all of the experiences that individual learners have in a program of education whose purpose is to achieve broad goals and related specific objectives, which is planned in terms of a framework of theory and research or past and present professional practice (Hass, 1980).

Curriculum is a goal or set of values, which are activated through a development process culminating in classroom experiences for students. The degree to which those experiences are a true representation of the envisioned goal or goals is a direct function of the effectiveness of the curriculum development efforts (Wiles & Bondi, 1989).
Curriculum ceases to be a thing, and it is more than a process. It becomes a verb, an action, a social practice, a private meaning, and a public hope. Curriculum is not just the site of our labour, it becomes the product of our labour, changing as we are changed by it. It is an on-going, if complicated, conversation (Pinar et al., 1995).

As for the question ‘What is curriculum theory’, I take the short answer from Pinar that curriculum theory is the “interdisciplinary study of educational experience”, “with a unique history, a complex present, an uncertain future” (2012, p. 2), requiring “not only the study of autobiography, history, and social theory, it requires as well the serious study of psychoanalytic theory” (2012, p. 57). Listed in the next section is the thinking of John Dewey, Lawrence Stenhouse and William Pinar on the process of learning and teaching inclusive of learning object, teacher’s role and curriculum assessment.

**John Dewey**

Being one of the most influential thinkers in the history of modern educational theory, Dewey’s curriculum thinking has been seminal. Included here are his ideas on the social importance of education, the quality of education, the role of teachers and the learning process.

For the social function of schooling, Dewey consistently contends that schooling is a social institution where social reform can and should take place. Dewey claims, however, that rather than preparing students to be reflective, autonomous and ethical beings capable of arriving at social truths through critical and intersubjective discourse, schools prepare students for docile compliance with authoritarian work and political structures, they discourage the pursuit of individual and communal inquiry and perceive higher learning as a monopoly of the institution of education (Dewey, 1976; 1980).

The purpose of education, therefore, in Dewey’s perception, should not revolve around the acquisition of a predetermined set of skills, but rather the realisation of a learner’s full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. Consequently, quality in education rests not merely on acquisition of content knowledge, but on the capacity to learn how to live. He argues that in order for education to be most effective, content must be presented in a way that allows the student to relate the information to prior experiences, thus deepening the connection with this new knowledge (Dewey, 1902, p. 13). It is here lies Dewey’s hypothesis of a dynamic and dialectical interplay between personal agency and the
larger social whole, in which both the individual and the society define and redefine one another.

Dewey re-imagined not only the way that the learning process should take place, but also the role that the teacher should play within that process. Dewey attaches high prestige to the role of teacher in education due to the direct influence teachers have in shaping the mental, moral and spiritual lives of children during their most formative years, often equating its social value to that of the ministry and to parenting (Dewey, 1959). For successful teaching, Dewey attaches great importance on teacher’s disposition as he believes that the key attributes of teacher are those personal inherent qualities. With a humanistic perspective, Dewey states that “with anxiety depicted on the lines of their faces, reflected in their strained high pitched voices and sharp manners” (Dewey, p. 35), teaching as a career can be depressing, and this inexorably influence student’s learning process in a negative way.

Regarding the learning process, Dewey holds that focusing almost solely on the subject matter would be a major pedagogical flaw, leading to inactivity of the student. While advocating “child-centred” classroom teaching, he also argues that too much reliance on the child could be equally detrimental to the learning process. “Teachers/we must take our stand with the child and our departure from him. It is he [the student] and not the subject-matter which determines both quality and quantity of learning” (Dewey, 1902, pp. 13-14).

**Lawrence Stenhouse**

As a pioneer in curriculum reform in Britain, Stenhouse contributed tremendously to curriculum study during the 1970s.

For the teaching and learning process, he re-describes the objects of learning as those human acts and social situations that pose controversial value issues concerning the conduct of human affairs. This entails pedagogical innovation in classrooms, enacting students’ engagement with newly cast objects of learning. Central to this model is a concept very similar to Confucian teaching philosophy: “dialogue/discussion” between teacher and student. As the learning objects—human acts and situations—are quite volatile between people with differing life experience, the discussion-based classroom learning outcomes will be inherently unpredictable and variable. However, the benefit through discussion is for students to modify and extend their understanding of acts and situations as they examine them in the light of each other’s evaluative outlook as well as their own (Elliott, 2006). Key to the Stenhouse approach is the NEUTRALITY of the teacher. He does not advocate dialogue
between teacher and students—the teacher’s authority always gets in the way of that. Instead, he advocates dialogue among students with the teacher playing ‘ring-master’. The important role of the teacher is to manage the discussion so as to ensure its quality, but never to reveal his/her own viewpoint. The main curriculum aim is to develop the autonomous judgement of the young person.

Stenhouse strives to bridge the world of the educational theorist in the university with that of the teacher because he believes that only in curricular form can ideas be tested by teachers. Curriculum is the ethical site within which ideas are tested. Pedagogical knowledge is what is provisional and tested in what he called the “laboratory” of the classroom. All educational ideas must find expression in curricula before we can tell whether they are day dreams or contributions to practice (Stenhouse, 1980).

Out of this consideration Stenhouse calls on teachers to assume the role of both researcher and practitioner. Teachers’ quality is, therefore, pivotal in this curriculum model. Stenhouse claims that “there can be no educational development without teacher development” and the capacity of teachers to adopt a research stance towards their practice will be the key in solving students’ disaffection in humanities education.

Stenhouse does not see evidence of curriculum quality from test scores. “The more objective an examination,” he writes, “the more it fails to reveal the quality of good teaching and good learning”, because all meaningful knowledge is contextualised (Stenhouse, 1975, p. 95). For the aforementioned shift of teaching culture and learning object to occur, a different perspective to curriculum assessment is necessary. The quality of teaching and learning should only be sought in terms of standards that are internal to the process of discussion. Successful teaching tends to be one ensuring that students have freedom to express their views regardless of majority opinion, that they are open to views that differ from their own, and that they have regard for reasons and evidence in defending their views and critiquing those of others. Not very successful teaching is regarded as “ethically inconsistent with the standards inherent in the process of developing understanding”, where teachers may use their authority position in the classroom to promote their personal views, or where they failed to protect divergence in discussion or allowed a student to disregard reasons and evidence that supported a different view to their own (Elliott, 2006).

William Pinar
Best known for his work in the area of curriculum theory, Pinar has been strongly associated with the reconceptualist movement in curriculum theory since the early 1970s. Curriculum theory in North America used to be one that was taken-for-granted as bureaucratisation of schooling with narrowly defined prescriptions and procedures. This notion was often attributed to Ralph Tyler, who has been called by some as “the father of educational evaluation and assessment” (Nowakowski, 1983). Pinar and his colleagues initiated a significant shift for curriculum theory and extended curriculum study to the intellectual exploration of a field by all, which moves beyond the narrowly defined prescriptions and procedures from Ralph Tyler. Into curriculum study Pinar embraces a variety of different forms of praxis, for instance “history, politics, race, gender, phenomenology, postmodernism, autobiography, aesthetics, theology, the institution of schooling, the world” (Pinar, 1999, p. xiv); and curriculum inquiry is to “understand, not just implement or evaluate, the curriculum” (Pinar, 1999, p. xiv).

With regard to the role of teachers in education, Pinar concurs with Stenhouse, claiming that public education could become a very different industry, or even extinct, unless teachers gain a degree of bargaining power and promote their own ideas.

The current situation for teaching as a cause, however, is worrisome in Pinar’s eyes. Nowadays, schools, Pinar has seen, are run by factions of people who are far removed from the classroom and may or may not have any relevant experience as to the pedagogical practices of the professional educator, and this has led to a state of school ‘deform’. School deform has caused teachers to become “technicians”, as they are now told to follow “scripts” that test makers deem to be “skills” that must be taught in order that students will be ready for the world of work. But what is worthy of vigilance is that these skills result in historical amnesia, political passivity and cultural standardisation. Similar to Apple (2012, p. 133), who analysed that “as the procedures of technical control enter into the school in the guise of pre-designed curricular/teaching/evaluation ‘system,’ teachers are being deskilled” (2012), Pinar also envisages the process of the teacher being “deskilled”. Skills that were deemed essential to the craft of working with children—such as curriculum deliberation and planning, designing teaching and curricular strategies for specific groups and individuals based in intimate knowledge of these people—are no longer as necessary.

Furthermore, Pinar finds that, in America, the current political and economic powers have placed the teacher in an unimportant position in the educational hierarchy and assumed that
business leaders know more about the curriculum and teaching than the teachers know themselves. In the case of Germany, the inability of teachers to have a voice has resulted in an environment in which the professionalism aspect of a professional group has been diminished to a non-existent level (Pinar, 2011). From this quagmire, similar to Apple (2012), Pinar urges teachers to take back their classroom, believing teachers are, or should be, driving the train on the discussion of curriculum reform; they have the power to reject corporatism by talking about how they see their identity as a teacher, teaching children, and avoiding the unreasonable demands that are brought on by the parents, administrators, politicians or policymakers.

For students, Pinar believes that failure to learn has been the result of separating the curriculum from the interests of students and the passion of teachers. Similar to Stenhouse, Pinar also believes that standardised tests should take the most blame, as “standardization makes everyone stupid” (Pinar, 2012, p. 55). Students, instead of experiencing an environment that places importance on the development of ideas and critical thinking, are subject to the successful completion of a test. But today’s classroom teaching is geared to teach ‘cognitive skills’, and they attend school where the system begs for learning to equate to test scores and they become ‘consumers’ of educational services rather than students (Pinar, 2011). This system also encourages drop-outs because schools only want to teach students who have acceptable test scores, which benefits the school’s accountability. By this system, students, especially poor students, are set up to fail but it is not really their fault.

Curriculum theories examine what may be going on in classroom and school, while sociology in schooling aims to interpret what functions school assumes for social development.

2.2.2. Sociology in schooling

For theories in educational sociology, I have focused on groups of theorists representing specific theoretical perspectives in the field of sociology of education: traditional functionalism, conflict theory and critical theory.

*Traditional functionalism*

The functionalist perspective, also called functionalism, is one of the major theoretical perspectives in educational sociology. It has its origins in the works of Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), who was especially interested in how social order is possible or how society remains relatively stable. In the theory of functionalism, society is made from a cluster of
connected structures that work to meet the needs of the society. Functionalism examines the necessary structures that make up a society and how each part helps to keep the society stable, and its focus, therefore, is on the ways in which universal education serves the needs of society; in other words, it focuses on how education helps society adjust and adapt to changing social conditions. Émile Durkheim (2014) developed the terms ‘role differentiation’ and ‘social solidarity’ to elucidate how schooling serves the survival needs of society. Role differentiation, also taken to mean a process of sorting, separates students on the basis of merit by the logic that social and economic development demands a division of labour. After sorting, ‘social solidarity’ ensures a reasonable level of social stability.

By this logic, functionalism focuses completely on the institution while paying little regard for the importance of the individual: the individual is acknowledged, but nothing they do really affects the structures of society. The point at issue here is that some roles enjoy high prestige, status and rewards, while others are relatively low in prestige, status and rewards. Thus, the critics, for example the Marxists who argue that the education system is not meritocratic for the private or elite schools benefit the wealthy, find functionalism problematic and they raise challenging problems: Whose needs are being met by a public schooling system that perpetuates existing inequalities? Does the system of public schooling really encourage the development of youth to its fullest capacity?

**Conflict theorists**

Conflict theory is a way of studying society that focuses on the inequalities of different groups in a society. It is based on the ideas of Karl Marx, from the nineteenth century, who believed a society evolves through several stages, the most important of which were feudalism, capitalism and finally socialism. Marx created a model which proposed that a society where one group exploited another group economically would actually contain the seeds of its own destruction. Conflict theory also examines the functions of education in social development.

While functionalism looks for beneficial contribution to an ordered society from schools, conflict theory sees schooling as a means to perpetuate the social reproduction of inequality. Both functionalists and conflict theorists agree that the educational system practises sorting, but they disagree about how it enacts that sorting. Functionalists claim that schools sort based on students’ merit; conflict theorists argue that schools sort along distinct class and ethnic lines. According to conflict theorists, schooling “takes the interests and perspectives of the
dominant social groups in society and elevates them to the status of universal norms. Having done this, it then uses these norms to measure the contributions of members of all other groups. In this way, the interests of a particular social class are misrepresented as belonging to the society as a whole, and this misrepresentation then serves to maintain the privileged position of the members of that class” (Feinberg & Soltis, 1985, p. 46).

The work by Bourdieu and Passeron explicitly endorses this point. In *State Nobility* (1998) Bourdieu maintains that schooling exists as a field where economic capital and cultural capital become convertible, indirectly and invisibly, and has thereby taken over the work of sanctification of social divisions. Here the process of ‘social solidarity’ (Durkheim, 1984, p. 31) is fulfilled by schooling legitimising the value of educational credentials, which can be analogous to the ideology of incarnation in the caste system in India.

The argument presented by Bowles and Gintis in their *Schooling in Capitalist America* (1976) also subscribes to a hypothesis that schools serve as a powerful means of maintaining power structures and creating a docile workforce for capitalism. They develop a “correspondence thesis” in which the key principle is that a “structural correspondence” occurs between the social relations of school life and production. Stated in a different way, this means that the values and culture of middle and upper classes are dominant throughout school life, but that the low-class students lack these and their advance is suppressed. From this perspective, social inequality is reproduced through a ‘hidden curriculum’.

Functionalism and conflict theorists have, however, been criticised as being too deterministic in downplaying the role of individual action and for being unable to account for social change.

*Critical theory and critical pedagogy*

Critical theory emerged when traditional functionalism and conflict theory were found inadequate in exploring the complexity between structure and individual agency in schooling. Drawing on the critical methods of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud, critical theory or ‘social critical theory’ (Elliott, 2014) developed in Germany in the 1930s. Critical theory maintains that ideology is the principal obstacle to human liberation (Geuss, 1981), and it is imperative that the ties between perception and action be addressed when construing the relationship between education and politics, between socio-political relations and pedagogical practices, between the reproduction of dependent hierarchies of power and privilege in the domain of everyday social life and that of classrooms and institutions (Fischman & McLaren, 2005). In brief, through examining and better understanding the role that schools play in transmitting
certain messages about political, social and economic life, the critical theorists believe that a
revolutionary critical pedagogy will allow educators to realise the possibilities of democratic
social values within their classroom (Kincheloe, 2004).

Out of critical theory branches critical pedagogy, a philosophy of education and social
movement that has developed and applied concepts from critical theory and related traditions
to the field of education and the study of culture (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997, p. 24).
Perceived to be one realisation of the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Lather, 1998;
McLaren, 2003), critical pedagogy views teaching as an inherently political act, rejecting the
neutrality of knowledge, and insists that issues of social justice and democracy itself are not
distinct from acts of teaching and learning. Critical pedagogy aims for emancipation from
oppression through an awakening of critical consciousness. When achieved, critical
consciousness encourages individuals to effect change in their world through social critique
and political action.

Paulo Freire is commonly regarded as the inaugural philosopher of critical pedagogy
(McLaren, 2000). Freire (1970) referred to schooling as liberatory action, or praxis, and for
Freire, school was no more than an impediment to the education of the poor, and thus he
sought to find strategies for students to intervene in what he considered to be a dehumanising
process (Kincheloe, 2004). He argued that people need to engage in a praxis that incorporates
theory, action and reflection as a means to work toward social change and justice, and he
devised a literacy programme based on this ideal as well as the practical needs of his students.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, Henry Giroux (1981) began to formulate a critical pedagogy that
synthesized the more progressive elements of John Dewey’s philosophy and the critical
Giroux identified that the students from a working-class family celebrated masculinity and
physical labour, but at the cost of rejecting mental labour and a deep-seated sexism and
racism. Thus, Giroux calls on radical educators to develop effective pedagogical strategies
through acquiring “a critical understanding of the language, modes of experience, and
cultural forms of the students” in order to develop effective pedagogical strategies (Giroux,
1981, p. 30). Recognising that “reproduction is a complex phenomenon that not only serves
the interest of domination but also contains the seeds of conflict and transformation” (Giroux,
1981, p. 109), Giroux, in 1983 developed a new theory which contained an understanding of
how power, resistance and human agency can become central elements in the struggle for social justice in schools and in society—a theory of resistance and schooling.

Michael Apple (2012) is another leading figure in critical pedagogy. He warns that functionalism may “miss the dynamic interplay between education and economy”, and he criticises and makes clear the danger of “reducing the complexity of this relationship to a bare parody of what actually exists at the level of practice” (2012, p. 63). With caution against determinism, Apple investigates the contradictory roles education plays in the dialectics of power and suggests education is an arena of political struggle, where contestation and dynamic dialectical interactions exist all the time and everywhere.

Theories in educational sociology look into the roles that school plays in society. The traditional fundamentalist sees school as a place where children can develop according to their unique needs and potential, and sees schooling as a fundamentally optimistic human endeavour that is characterised by aspirations for progress and betterment. Conflict theorists disagree, providing evidence that schooling is designed with the intention of causing the social reproduction of inequality. Critical theory, based on an understanding of how power, resistance and human agency can become central elements in the struggle for social justice in schools and in society, is prone to admitting the multifaceted nature of schooling’s social function and advocating that education can be a political arena where opportunities are available for transformative work.

To this point I have reviewed several mainstream theories in curriculum and educational sociology, but what is also worthy of attention is a germane epistemology—how to perceive the nature of knowledge in curriculum study.

2.2.3. Short-term empiricism and epistemological shift in curriculum study

This section mainly reviews the contribution of short-run empiricism in curriculum study: the gradual switch away from an emphasis on statistical measurement and theoretical explanation towards an emphasis on naturalistic and narrative means of viewing events in school.

Empiricism is a theory which states that knowledge comes only or primarily from sensory experience and emphasises the role of empirical evidence in the formation of ideas over the notion of innate ideas or traditions. Pragmatism is one school of empiricism contending that most philosophical topics are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes.
The philosophy of pragmatism “emphasises the practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences” (Gutek, 2013, p. 76).

The impact brought by empiricism on curriculum study is epistemological. Traditional curriculum study assumed that knowledge was fixed and universally true; curriculum structures for instance were classifications of indubitable truths for the purpose of authoritative transmission. This thinking was later challenged by empiricists, such as Stenhouse for example. Stenhouse holds that knowledge—whether it be ethical knowledge or knowledge of empirical facts—is provisional and open to questioning and discussion (1975). Therefore, “understanding (of social situations and human acts and of the controversial value issues which they raise) is chosen as a pedagogical aim because it cannot be achieved”, but it “can always be deepened” (Stenhouse, 1975, pp. 93-94)—the standard seems ever-receding, as once reached, another appears.

Based on this general epistemological stance, Stenhouse also launched his critique of the “psycho-statistical paradigm” and he lists, as Skilbeck summarised (1983), the following five flaws of the psycho-statistical paradigm in educational research: its dependence on samples, not cases, and on probability theory not professional judgement; its inferior and dubious generalisation; ambiguous or trivial findings; its arguing for a uniform teaching approach across all children in the class and all classes; and its separation between the research community and practitioners community. In place of the “psycho-statistical paradigm”, Stenhouse espouses case study method and a humanistic perspective in education studies which give centrality of context.

Cronbach and Guba are also key theorists in making the turn indicative of the subtlety and complexity involved in the process of teaching and social interaction in classrooms. They are best known for their pioneering efforts in forging a new world view and opening the repertoire of techniques for educational researchers to include rigorous, humanistic and qualitative methods.

Considered to be “one of the most prominent and influential educational psychologists of all time” (Kupermintz, 2003, p. 289), Cronbach’s contribution goes beyond psychological testing and measurement. He shares with the humanistic scholar and the artist in the effort to gain insight into contemporary relationships and to align the culture’s view of man with present realities, thinking that to know man as he is IS no mean aspiration (Shavelson, 2003). He advocates the use of extensive local studies and field methods, producing useful narratives
of teaching and learning. He endeavours to understand the person-situation interactions in educational settings, recognising the abandonment of strict scientism is in favour of a more pluralistic philosophical and empirical agenda, and emphasising that the role of context is just as essential as improved interpretations of educational processes.

Guba is one of the leading figures in the struggle to help legitimate qualitative work in many professional organisations. His *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where he offers the incisive critique of positivism, began the momentous revolution in educational research which resulted in the growth of qualitative research methods in education. The ‘naturalistic paradigm’ takes account of the nature of social experience, endorsing a view of human activities in their natural setting. Because it offers a contextual relevance and richness that is unmatched, naturalistic inquiry displays sensitivity to process which is virtually excluded in paradigms stressing control and experimentation. Later, in 1990, Guba went on to call for dialogue and debate on underlying principles of research and discusses the challenges of post positivism, critical theory and constructivism (1990), which builds a bridge between the quantitative and qualitative paradigms. The best argument he offers in favour of constructivist approaches validates and encourages multiple and varied approaches for qualitative research.

Historically in research practice, Jackson’s *Life in Classrooms* was one of the ground-breaking studies. Jackson’s endeavour is towards making the familiar strange and revealing the underlying and taken-for-granted conditions that shape so much of school life. He achieved this aim by a qualitative ethnographic method of recording classroom culture. He summarises the nature of classroom life in three elements: “crowds” (pupils have to cope with delays, denial of their desires and social distractions), “praise” (contradictory allegiances required to both teachers and peers) and “power” (unequal power relations given to teachers over pupils) (Jackson, 1968, pp. 1-38). He names what he finds as the “Daily Grind”, or a tedious system of rules and regulations that are designed to promote unconscious and passive consumption, obedience and acquiescence. Drawing extensively on Durkheim’s work, Jackson argues that the daily grind is essentially the hidden curriculum of schools that could be preparing students for a tedious life in industrialised society. The hidden curriculum theory reasons, in effect, that there is an obvious set of knowledge that schools teach (the overt curriculum) and, at the same time, there is a covert set of knowledge that the school transmits (for example, a concept of social order in the covert curriculum).
Theoretically, out of his ethnographic and close-up observation of classrooms activities, Jackson makes popular the theory of the hidden curriculum. The methodological move he takes, however, seems more prominent. Methodologically, *Life in Classrooms* has been well documented as positive proof of the limitations of a purely quantitative approach, and it accrues valuable information that qualitative research can provide in curriculum research.

This shift of epistemological means of looking at curriculum phenomena from statistical measurement to interpretive-inclined understanding raises the issue of educational research methods. The next section presents a review of methodological thinking of my selected methods: case study and educational evaluation.
Chapter Three: Methodological Choice—Case-Based Evaluative Inquiry (CBEI)

I have, to this point, followed a trail from related theoretical perspectives in curriculum thoughts to educational sociology, followed by a brief introduction to an archetypal empirical epistemology in curriculum research. To some extent this offers a general idea with regard to the social function of schooling, the increasing complexity in curriculum study and certain perspectives of how to look at the complex process of curriculum. Many issues and ideas may await evidence, but through what means? This chapter first examines some critical methodological concerns over the politics of knowledge and the ensued challenges. This will lay the bedrock for my methodological choice.

3.1. The Major Methodological Concern: The Politics of Knowledge

“The essential political problem for the intellectual is not to criticize the ideological contents supposedly linked to science or to ensure that his own scientific practice is accompanied by a correct ideology, but that of ascertaining the possibility of constituting a new politics of truth. The problem is not changing people’s consciousness—or what’s in their heads—but the political, economic, institutional regime of the production of truth”, Foucault said in 1980 (p. 133). I quote Foucault here because it is of critical importance to clarify my perception of the politics of knowledge, from which many problems arise, before arguing for what might be appropriate methods.

The contemporary discourse on knowledge revolves around several issues and the first of three that concern me is about what ‘knowledge’ means, given fundamental changes that the concept of knowledge has undergone in the course of the twentieth century (Weiler, 2002, 2006, 2009). Providing a universally accepted definition of the notion of knowledge goes beyond the scope of this research, but this research at least demands attention be paid to the politics of the question.

When it comes to “whose knowledge matters”, recognising the fact that knowledge and power are closely and symbiotically related is nothing new; this notion can be found in different forms in the works of Marx and Engels (1972), Karl Mannheim (1955) as well as in those of Emile Durkheim (1984) and Max Weber (1992)—and, in the field of curriculum study, by MacDonald (1976) and Weiler (2009). In summary, four facets of the close
The relationship between knowledge and power can be highlighted: the hierarchies in the existing knowledge order, the reciprocal legitimation between knowledge and power, the transnational division of labour in the contemporary knowledge order, and the political economy of the commercialisation of knowledge. Specifically, in this research I would like to draw attention to the three concerns regarding ‘hierarchies’ and ‘division of labour’.

First of all, politics exists substantively in this research when viewed from the perspective of ‘hierarchies of knowledge’ and a ‘transnational division of labour’ in academic research. For example, in an era of globalisation, today’s world, aided by technology, has seen an increasingly universal flow of information that holds significance for many. What is worth noting is that there exist global disparities in access to both the production and the consumption of knowledge. Taking qualitative inquiry (QI), for example, as pointed out by Weiler (2009), there is a particular division of labour existing: key intellectual tasks, such as setting theoretical agendas and methodological standards, are the prerogative of a relatively small number of groups and institutions that play a disproportionately important role in this system (media controllers, universities).

China, as Hsiung (2012, 2015) identifies, has been in a peripheral position in terms of methodological discussion when viewed from a global perspective. Most of the textbooks in Chinese university teaching addressing how to conduct social and curriculum research are the translation of works by Western scholars, which unintentionally fail to address the issues embedded in Chinese context (Chen, 2016). Being in the methodological “periphery”, China is learning from the “core” in qualitative social inquiry; the political dilemma thus lies in what to prioritise in this structure of authority and power—whose knowledge counts in the research, the Western theories or research action in the Chinese local context? How can we create possibilities of dialogue between Chinese curriculum wisdom and Western curriculum theories and form a dynamic relationship between the two?

I believe it wise to take the initiative to ameliorate this situation, endeavouring for a shift in the current division of labour that sees scholarship in the core, producing theory and methods, while those in the periphery consume and reproduce it. As a means of developing a globalised qualitative inquiry (GQI), it is worth attempting a study focused on the locality of the Chinese context while maintaining informed globally.

Secondly, also as a result of power and knowledge there are tensions between theory and practice: what should be prioritised in the research—action or theory? This is a choice which
lies at the root of how I inquiry: should my action in the field be framed by the theories from the literature review or should I do the research first and then justify my methodology by drawing on the literature? Will it be the application of a theoretical framework, or the development of a framework following Swedberg’s style (2009, 2010, 2012, 2014, 2016)?

Specifically, it is how to manage the tensions between “knowing what” (the technical knowledge from the textbooks and supervisors) and “knowing how” (the practitioner’s tacit knowledge and ability to deal with life’s contingencies and exigencies). Placed within the framework of power relations in knowledge, this is another political dilemma as it asks for practitioners to choose whether to be challenging or submissive to knowledge hierarchies; that is, it is a choice whether to take research as the “sources of scepticism toward the victorious systems of knowledge” and “means of recovering and transmitting knowledge that has been cornered, marginalized or even defeated” (Nandy, 2000, p. 118). It is a choice either to relegate my experiential knowledge derived from fieldwork, or to have it take the lead.

Rather than confining and prescribing practice, I take the stance that theories should serve practice. By Stenhouse’s (1975) analysis, educational research has as its overriding aim the support of educational acts, thus it is not ‘pure’ but ‘applied’. Eisner also proposed that most ‘pure’ research cannot inform educational practice because people have ignored the fact that most changes in practice preceded rather than followed the findings of educational research (Eisner, 1984; Lagerman, 2000). This implies that the fundamental task of educational research is to find approaches to research which produce theory that is of “use to both practitioners of education and to practitioners of educational research and which enables both to act in the light of systematic intelligence” (Stenhouse, 1980, p. 1).

Given the situation where many disciplines in social research are newly developed in China, I cannot be assured of the applicability of the introduced theories from Western educational sociology, including the methodological theories I am using in this case, in a Chinese context. I need to enter the field and learn while testing the theories; I have to learn from my experience, a learning process reciprocal to top-down approaches. This will help to build indigenous knowledge from the bottom up.

The last concern, but probably the most daunting one, arises at the level of the relationship between the researcher, their participants and the audience. Wherever knowledge hierarchies occur, they reflect structures of authority and power, dictating higher and lower ranks in a given order, domination and subordination, greater and lesser value, prestige and influence,
and thus the essence of politics. This raises a root problem: how much authority should the researcher claim in the research? Out of this root branch other problems: How much ownership of the participant’s data can the researcher claim? To what degree could validity and generalisability be contested by participants and audience? Who should decide whose priorities are addressed by the research and whose values are voiced during the inquiry? If the research is to look at the quality of a social programme, who is qualified to judge, against what standard, and who should set the criteria for the judgement? Whether and how these questions are raised remains controversial; however, they are worthy of exploration.

What seems urgent, at this point, is a germane strategy to address concerns that are endemic in the research—the politics of knowledge, for instance—and other possible but unknown issues of applying introduced methods in the Chinese field. This calls for a research ethos of power sharing and I am drawn to responsive/democratic evaluative inquiry.

3.2. Power-Sharing Ethos from Democratic and Responsive Evaluation

Evaluation has only recently been accepted as a form of research. Evaluation Tree by Alkin and Christie (2004) describes the historical development of evaluative inquiry and includes almost all the main schools in this field. In Evaluation Research (1967), Suchman first distinguished between evaluation as a common-sense usage, referring to the “social process of making judgments of worth” (p. 7) and evaluative research that uses scientific research methods and techniques. Guba and Lincoln (2001) categorised evaluation as one of the three basic forms of disciplined inquiry—the other two being research and policy analysis. The study and discussion in this field within Western academia has been dynamic and illuminating. To cope with the challenges arising from the politics of knowledge, I choose to follow democratic evaluation (MacDonald, 1979) and responsive evaluation (Stake, 2001) for their advocating of power sharing in the inquiry process.

3.2.1. Democratic evaluation

In the 1970s, MacDonald and his colleagues had been wary of the power structure involved in social research. Research is primarily concerned with the creation, organisation and dissemination of knowledge. But, conventionally, as MacDonald and Walker (1975) observe, dissemination comes last in the order, and in some cases it is omitted altogether in educational research. Partly as a result, education has become a long-standing mythology, where “at all levels of the system what people think they are doing, what they say they are doing, what they appear to others to be doing, and what in fact they are doing, may be
sources of considerable discrepancy” (Macdonald & Walker, 1975, p. 8). MacDonald and Walker thus propose that knowledge dissemination should be prioritised to “knowledge creation and knowledge organization” in the planning and conduct of educational research, because “knowledge is the basis on which many forms of power are legitimated and, in the case of education, the medium through which power is exercised” (p. 6).

MacDonald (1976) in “Evaluation and the Control of Education” classifies evaluative inquiry under three ideal types in a political dimension: bureaucratic, autocratic and democratic. The principal questions that determine this classification are: who controls the pursuit of new knowledge, and who has access to it? Democratic evaluation is described as follows:

Democratic evaluation is an information service to the community about the characteristics of an educational programme. It recognises value pluralism and seeks to represent a range of interests in its issue formulation. The basic value is an informed citizenry, and the evaluator acts as broker in exchanges of information between differing groups. His techniques of data gathering and presentation must be accessible to non-specialist audiences. His main activity is the collection of definitions of, and reactions to, the programme. He offers confidentiality to informants and gives them control over his use of information. The report is non-recommendatory, and the evaluator has no concept of information misuse. The evaluator engages in periodic negotiation of his relationships with sponsors and programme participants. The criterion of success is the range of audiences served. The report aspires to ‘best seller’ status. The key concepts of democratic evaluation are ‘confidentiality’, ‘negotiation’ and ‘accessibility’. The key justificatory concept is the ‘right to know’. (MacDonald, 1976, p. 134)

In sum, MacDonald (1978) argues that researchers should recognise “value pluralism” and that every social programme be taken as a microcosm of society, saturated with its values, authority systems, aspirations and constraints, and arguments and diversity of view. The main job for the evaluative inquirer is therefore to understand those different expectations and values, and to illustrate and represent them to readers and outsiders. This task incorporates the participants into the evaluator role: given that they live with the programme, they should be entitled to raise their judgement towards the quality of it. To elevate participants’ perceptions also demands new investigating methods and MacDonald advocates personal portrayal as research data (1977).
Historically, the ideas of responsive evaluation germinated from Robert Stake’s work of the late 1960s. Feeling unsatisfied with a quasi-experimental approach or correlational surveys in curriculum study, Stake strives for alternatives. In terms of ontology, Stake is more inclined towards relativism and he believes that social inquiry is more about constructing knowledge in a social context than discovering reality, as “there is no factual reality that can serve as a legitimate ground to validate different experiences and interpretations” (Abma & Stake, 2001, p. 17). Stake claims to be a “populist”, a “localist”, thus meaning in social research for him depends on where you are, whom you are working with, what the circumstances are, and the quality of a programme, in such a way as schooling strongly depends on the situation and context.

When it comes to curriculum study, Stake argues that curriculum research should pay due attention to the contingencies among background conditions, classroom activities and scholastic outcomes, and that refined methodology should be developed to reflect the fullness, the complexity and dynamic in education (Stake, 1967). Formal evaluation, which in Stake’s eyes is usually centralising and conservative, seems working more for the powers that exist than for the powers that should exist. He proposes evaluative inquiry being responsive.

Being ‘responsive’ requires the inquirer to take value pluralism, to be open, to come to understand what is going on in the field and to find more than the initial assumed issues and pay attention to issues that emerge in the evaluation context (Stake, 1975a, pp. 25-26). Stake says that “I admire most the modest evaluator, playing a supportive role, restraining his impulses to advocate, unlike the crusading evaluator, however honestly and forthrightly he announces his commitments. . . . I emphasize the facilitator-role more than deliverer of insights” (1975b, pp. 36–37). The inquirer serves “as knowledge facilitator”, but not the traditional expert role of the evaluator, and the responsive evaluator should not press for consensus that does not exist (Abma & Stake, 2001, p. 15).

As for the key problem of judgement and decision-making in evaluation, Stake disagrees with Scriven (1965). Scriven believes that the evaluator is best qualified to judge (Scriven, 1965), while Stake advises that the most important judge will often be someone other than the evaluator. Quoting Taylor and Maguire’s (1965) “well-identified” stakeholders in curriculum programme, Stake claims that the following five groups should be the “judges who should be heard” in curriculum research: spokespersons for society at large, subject matter experts,
teachers, parents and the students themselves. As is developed in his concept of “naturalistic generalisation”, readers and audiences are actually also judges who are supposed to enjoy decision-making through a contextualised “vicarious experience” and reconstruction of quality. The key idea is that if readers will have to interpret texts and ideas themselves (in this case, Stake’s work), instead of being told how to understand them, they will perhaps be more willing to accept and use these ideas in their own contexts (Stake & Trumbull, 1982).

As for the concept of quality of social programme in evaluation, in “Representing Quality in Evaluation” (2001) Stake wrote that for constructivists, quality does not exist until people declare it so; and “the meaning of quality is formed by everybody .... The quality of a social venture needs to be seen partly as a function of the total experience of its stakeholders, and partly as the experience of individuals and subgroups”

To be more specific, the power sharing ethos encouraged by both democratic and responsive evaluative inquiry helps alleviate the issues out of the politics of knowledge. For example, this ethos legitimises the priority in this study of raising the voices of students and teachers, who are the ones who live the schooling life but who have long been marginalised in Chinese social and curriculum study. This ethos also justifies my tacit knowledge of Chinese school cultures as it endorses the centrality of local context in this research. This is significant because it allows my fieldwork practice to go beyond the theories in the textbooks. Furthermore, this evaluative perspective also encourages me to explore a fresh relationship with those who read my research report, while I work as a knowledge facilitator, and the reader is encouraged to make their own decisions about the quality of Chinese schooling.

3.3. Personalised Methodology out of Case Study

Besides evaluative inquiry, case study methodology also appeals for its flexibility in dealing with uncertainty and emergencies in fieldwork.

Case study has a long history in many disciplines (Simons, 1980; Ragin, 1992; Gomm, Hammersley & Foster, 2004; Platt, 2007), and a group of Western scholars have produced a variety of definitions and descriptions pertinent to case study: Adelman, Jenkins and Kemmis, 1976; Chadderton and Torrance, 2011; Cohen et al., 2007; Creswell, 2013; Duff, 2008; Dörnyei, 2007; Gibbert and Ruigrok, 2010; Johnson, 1992; MacDonald and Walker, 1975; Nunan, 1992; Silverman, 2005; Simons, 2009, 2014; Stake, 1995, 2005; Stenhouse, 1975, 1978; Van Wynsberghe and Khan, 2007; Yin, 2003. Case study, however, has long
been a contested terrain in social sciences research, which is characterised by varying and sometimes opposing approaches espoused by many research methodologists.

The definitions of case study vary with its user’s particular emphasis and direction for research. For example, Stake (1978, p. 6), drawing upon Louis Smith’s (1978) rendition, defines case study as “a bounded system” (p. 2); Merriam defines case study as “a thing, a single entity, a unit around which there are boundaries” (1998, p. 27); Yin (2003, p. 13) suggests that a case study is “an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident”; Hartley (2004, p. 323) states that case study “consists of a detailed investigation, often with data collected over a period of time, of phenomena, within their context,” aiming “to provide an analysis of the context and processes which illuminate the theoretical issues being studied”; Van Wysberghe and Khan (2007, p. 80) define a case study as “a transparadigmatic and transdisciplinary heuristic that involves the careful delineation of the phenomena for which evidence is being collected (event, concept, program, process, etc.).”

In relation to typology of case study, there are also variations. Stenhouse (1983 cited in Nunan 1992, p. 78) classifies case studies into four types: a neo-ethnographic case, an evaluative case study, a multisite case study and an action case study. Stake (1995) names three kinds of case study: an intrinsic case study, an instrumental case study and collective case study. Yin (2003) categorises case study as either an exploratory case study, an explanatory case study or a descriptive case study. Merriam (1998) identifies an interpretative case study and an evaluative case study.

Moreover, case study “is not assigned to a fixed ontological, epistemological or methodological position” (Rosenberg & Yates, 2007, p. 447). Philosophically, case study research can be realist or positivist-oriented. Yin himself describes his approach to case study as using a “realist perspective” (2014, p. 17). Although he recognises the descriptive and interpretive elements of case study, embedded within Yin’s case study design are the hallmarks of a postpositivist approach to research: seeking rival explanations and falsifying hypotheses, the capability for replication with a multiple case study design, the pursuit of generalisations (if required), and minimising levels of subjectivity. Yin’s case study focuses on maintaining objectivity in the methodological processes. Case study, however, can also be from the relativist or interpretivist perspective. Stake’s case study takes reality as being
pluralistic and plastic, and certain layers of reality are unknowable; knowledge is therefore co-constructed between researcher and participants rather than discovered (1995, p. 99).

Additionally, several scholars have lifted case study from a research method to methodology (Hartley, 2004, p. 323; Titscher, 2000, p. 43). Stake puts it another way: “case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case” (Stake, 2000, p. 435). In fact, case study as a research strategy comprises an all-encompassing method, which means that a number of methods may be used—either qualitative, quantitative (Doolin, 1996; Stake, 1994, Hartley, 2004, p. 324) or any mix of both (Yin, 2003a, pp. 14-15).

Exposed to this variety of paradigms and approaches that case study enables, I see the advantage case study offers to my study: I would have the opportunity to eclectically combine elements, research techniques and strategies, for instance, from each approach that best serves and supports the study. Specifically, the versatility of case study research to accommodate the researcher’s philosophical position would enable me to tailor designs and approaches to address the increasingly perplexing issues in today’s Chinese schooling, and the uncertainty of applying Western theories in a Chinese context.

Put another way, the versatility endorsed by case study empowers its user with the capacity to deploy a methodology of Individualism. “Individualism” here has three layers of meaning. It first of all means individual case study. In the study I propose, in addition to its idiosyncratic background and context described in the previous chapter, disconnection and isolation of individuals (the students, teachers and other schooling staff) from their living and working context would be imprudent for this quest; proper attention, therefore, is needed towards the contingent, dynamic and transient aspects of classroom life. This study encompasses humanistic and naturalistic perspectives. In addition, if taking the concept of a case being a ‘bounded system’, the studying process seems analogous to a boundary exploration—is there any boundary of schooling life? Or, how far can Western theories travel?

Secondly, “individualism” refers to the individual researcher. Case study encourages the researcher’s perceptions and interpretations as part of the research and, as a result, a subjective and interpretive orientation flows throughout the inquiry (Crewell, 2014). Subjectivity is openly acknowledged, and to manage this, the researcher embraces a reflexive stance within the study, adopting methods, such as memo writing and journaling, that support this position (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Miles et al., 2014, Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Kushner
identifies that there is seamless continuity between the researcher and the methodology s/he chooses (2000, p. 64). As the uniqueness arising from each particular context asks for special attention, there are personal preferences and constraints or bias that I, as a researcher, bring to this work and which will influence my methodological options. I believe it wise to have these reflected in my study.

For example, arising from my experience I have my own ontological and epistemological preference. Being a teacher, I have observed how the student’s perception of the same concept in the classroom varies in correspondence with his or her different experience. In curriculum study, such as the proposed quest of schooling life in a Chinese context, for instance a communist civilisation, does it sound reasonable to presume that “reality” may understandably vary dramatically, not merely among policymakers, principals, teachers, students and parents, but among individuals of the same group? Taking students as an example, reality, to students from families within varied social strata, may be differentiated into many layers; everyday schooling experience may not turn out to be the same for children from a single mother, or a drunk or abusive father, or for a child who is parentless; schooling life in the last year of senior middle may also differ starkly from that of junior middle school. Taking into account all the variable contexts in curriculum study, the list of shifting and erratic reality seems endless. I prefer, therefore, to take a constructivism-interpretivist stance in this research.

Thirdly, “individualism” can also refer to the individual participant involved. The fundamental goal of case study research is to conduct an in-depth analysis of an issue, within its context, with a view to understanding the issue from the perspective of participants (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2014). Methods used in case study to facilitate achieving the aim of co-constructing data most often include observations, interviews, focus groups, document and artefact analysis (Merriam, 2009; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2006; Stewart, 2014; Yin, 2014). The lives and views of young people in the particular study, for instance, are of central importance to gaining clues to understanding the schooling culture. Furthermore, for the sake of social justice, this research makes attempt to see power structure through the stakeholders’ eyes and against their criteria—that is, to subject power structure to their (Chinese youth, teachers, principals and parents) judgement. This indicates an inversion between programme and person; it aims to see how well a social programme like schooling fits in people’s lives, instead of how well people fit into the programme. The rationale is: “we need to hold educational programs more to account for
their success in meeting the needs and desires of young people” (Kushner, 2000, p. 33). This stance demands a collaborative relationship between researcher(s) and research participants.

To summarise, case study, deployed as a methodology here, seems supportive with its portfolio of research approaches and strategies of the research needs I can envisage. The flexibility and versatility case study methodology offers provides an opportunity not only for methodology individualism but also an emergent research design, both of which look germane for this research.

To conclude, both out of the concerns of research background and the nature of the research objectives, a case-based evaluative inquiry with democratic and responsive perspective arising from constructivism is my methodological choice.
SECTION TWO: The M School Study

This section provides the case report arising out of the fieldwork data. This report will offer what Stake and Trumbull named as “vicarious experience” (1982) on one hand, while on the other hand, bulk raw data—for example, transcription-style interview data. The philosophy behind a vicarious experience is that of the researcher as a neutral agent collecting information from the field, sharing the author’s interpreting power with the reader in trade for ‘naturalistic generalisation’ (Stake & Trumbull, 1982) where the reader will make decisions on the usefulness of the research grounded in their daily practice. This is not to evade the responsibility of being ‘judge’ and being in a position to ‘conclude’ on the part of the author, but to remind the reader of their power in developing their interpretation of the fieldwork.

The data presentation, therefore, is presented following what Geertz (1973) called ‘thick description’, which was later also advocated by Denzin (1989), Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Patton (1980). To be concrete, the case study attempts to include the five key types of thick description advocated by Denzin (1989): “biographical”, in terms of placing the scenario chronologically; “historical”, for bringing an earlier historical moment of experience alive in vivid detail (p. 92); “situational”, for creating a visual picture of the situation and locating the person in the situation (p. 94); “relational”, for bringing a relationship alive; and “interactional”, for the vignette focusing on interactions between two or more persons (Denzin, p. 95).
Chapter Four: Guanxi and Access to the Field

School

Guanxi, loosely translated in English as “social leverage” through social networks, connections, personal relationships or networking, is a way of life in China and represents the social capital, which was described in relation to Bourdieu in Chapter two as a means educational advantage. Access to the research field has been pivotal, sometimes such that it can be determinative. In China, one needs to have some guanxi; and to be specific, in my case, to know someone in order to gain access to the anticipated research field.

Guanxi, a Chinese term referring to interpersonal connections, first appeared in the West in the 1980s in popular business writings that advised about cultural factors affecting doing business in China (Pye, 1982, Butterfield, 1983, and Alston, 1989). The concept of guanxi has seen dramatic population in the Western literature, particularly in the commercial and business managerial field as it had been identified as one of the most important key success factors in doing business in China (Yeung & Tung, 1996; Ambramson & Ai, 1999); and a source of sustainable competitive advantage (Tsang, 1998; Fock & Woo, 1998); acclaimed as marketing’s third paradigm (Ambler, 1994), thus linking the concept with the school of relationship marketing (Simmons & Munch, 1996), and even extolled as the future direction for the Western business practices in the new century (Lovett, Simmons & Kali, 1999). In other words, guanxi can be seen as a potential solution for most problems of entering and operating business in China. Despite the growing number of publications on guanxi and its impact on international companies doing business in China, there is still considerable confusion around the concept as well as its alleged benefits (Fan, 2002). There remains a dearth of research into Guanxi’s influence on academic impartiality and credibility, and ethics in social research.

4.1. Cases of Guanxi

4.1.1. Guanxi too strong

Having taught for almost 20 years, I have some guanxi. M City, where I live now, is not my first option for this study. Z city, my hometown, is my preferred option because I have more guanxi there. Several of my classmates from high school or university have become the
Principal in their schools, mostly secondary schools. I called one in early January of 2014 and asked for a favour. Knowing that it is for my PhD thesis, my principal friend said:

*No worries, Yanming. Just come and I will assure that you can get whatever you need. My staff can give full cooperation. As for the students, ask your supervisor and see what you need for your thesis. You will have it.*

I was hoping that she would ask about the Participant Information Sheets, the Consent Form and the ethical approval number, which I had readily prepared both in English and Chinese, as the University of Auckland required. She did not; and so I brought it up. She replied:

*Well, I don’t know why you need to have those things; just let me know what you need from me. You are now doing a PhD study, and I trust you.*

I stopped worrying about the problem of seeking naturalistic data. The Union in China does not work the same way as it does in Western societies. Working closely with, or aided by a school Principal, even walking around on campus with the Principal, may imply much to the potential teacher and student participants. If I am expecting to understand and learn from people’s normal daily school life, guanxi looks too strong here.

4.1.2. Guanxi too weak

I change my research plan and shift to M City. I originally planned to compare two schools—one elite school preparing its students for overseas study, and one non-elite school—hoping to have a comparative study of their respective curriculum to understand whether current Chinese schooling perpetuates the emerging social stratification. For the elite school, I intended to use an international school co-managed by one British educational institute and one local Chinese enterprise; two principals thus take the lead, the British one and the local one. The person I know in that school is a female teacher who thinks the relationship between herself and the female Chinese principal is close enough that she can help me to get the access.

I do not make any extra effort, such as inviting them to yum cha or gift giving, to establish and nurture the guanxi needed. Usually people do engage in such activities in China in order to get the job done, but it seems to me to be against Western ethics. I made an international phone call in May of 2014 to the female Chinese principal and introduced myself and my research. I offer to be a teacher assistant if necessary in order to make the research reciprocal. The reply is polite and reasonable: she needs to see my CV and the research plan and she needs to talk with the British principal.
I email her my CV, Participant Information Sheets (PIS), four versions in respect to students, parents, teachers and principals, and an introduction to the research, all bilingual—Chinese and English. In the email I am very clear that some other documents, including the ethical approval, the Informed Consent Forms (ICF), and the provisional question lists, are available on demand. I also study the school’s website and find the email address of the British Principal. I take the initiative in emailing him and introducing myself, my supervisor and my research.

I never received any reply from them. This guanxi turns out to be too weak.

4.1.3. Guanxi in this study

The guanxi in my case seems valid in my eyes, and an idea comes to me. I happen to know the right person: Feng.

Feng is the friend who helps me to obtain access to M School. In his late thirties, Feng is from Shanxi province, which is adjacent to my home province, Henan. In M City we are both immigrants and northern Chinese, which may also help explain how we can so easily become friends. He is usually in blue jeans and a shirt of well-matched colours. He does not like sports and in his leisure time he busies himself with online games. He is 175 cm in height, and he has a cute small beer belly. His hair is thick and black, cut in a regulation hairstyle. As he is from the place where the Terracotta Army was unearthed, his friends joke that he has a face like the terracotta warriors, but a chubby one. He is honest and tolerant, as well as being smart and sociable. I guess he is able to change his speaking style depending on who he is talking to, a communicative skill both helping him in his current position and strengthened by that position.

Feng graduated from a prominent university where he learned fine art. He used to teach drawing in primary school. He was my son’s drawing teacher at one time, but he stopped two years ago. I heard from my nine-year-old son that nowadays some of his drawing lessons had become self-teaching classes. Feng was and is still on loan to his current administrative position in the local Education Bureau, working on preparing statutory documentation for inspection by a superior administrative institution. The office is named “创建办/Chuang Jian Ban”, a short form which can be literally translated as Office for Formulation and Establishment. When asked why he was selected for that position, he said that not all people were willing to do the job, which might be boring and meaningless, but, he also hinted that not all had the guanxi to get the role. Now that this role has rewarded him with a less
competitive route for promotion in his career path, others, including me, are appreciative of
his forethought in accepting the job. However, being on loan for more than two years also
indicates an impassable gulf between teaching and administration roles in the mechanics of
Chinese school employment.

Feng’s new position, to me, seems gratifying for him. He has become more socially
resourceful than when he was a primary teacher. In March 2014, during a quite casual tea
drinking conversation, I mentioned my idea of doing a research project for my PhD thesis and
that I need help to get access to one of the local secondary schools. Unexpectedly, he said
that would be a mere trifle to him. I suggested that he needed to talk to the principals of my	
targeted school, but he answered: “I am very familiar with almost all principals of schools in
this district. So you can pick one and I will arrange your access. Not a big deal.”

So, the first thing I did in order to gain access for my fieldwork was to call Feng and ask
about his plan to introduce me to the school leader in the M Secondary School, as he had
promised in April 2014.

4.2. Meeting to Request Access

Monday, 1 December 2014
M School is ideal as it is 20 minutes’ walk from my home. Feng checks his work scheme and
agrees to take me to meet Han, the Deputy Principal, the next day, Tuesday.

“Why not the Principal and when shall I go to see the Principal?” I ask over the phone, and
he says: “No worries. Han’s words count in that school. We can go to his office at around
eight tomorrow morning if it sounds ok to you.” I was fine with any time that suited him. But
he later cancels this plan and shifts it to Wednesday afternoon.

Wednesday, 3 December 2014
I dress myself appropriately for meeting the Deputy Principal: a black leather casual jacket,
black jeans and a pair of light brown platform boots. Before I leave, I put all the documents I
have prepared into my white leather bag: the ethics, the information sheets, the consent forms,
the provisional question lists.

I see Feng’s gorgeous white Peugeot 408 waiting with the engine running at around 3:50 p.m.
when I am near the gate of our residential area. I am sorry to keep him waiting, but I am not
late. Well, maybe one or two minutes. He lowers the car window and waves, a half-smoked
cigarette in his hand. I get in and sit in the back seat. He throws the cigarette out of the window and we set off.

The familiarity between us saves us daily pleasantries. I am interested in knowing more about his current position and how that made him socially wise and able. So I begin our short talk asking what he has been busy with and what specific work he has been doing recently. He has been concentrating on preparing the documentation required by the Ministry of Education for the national evaluative inspection—it begins next week. He puts it frankly, that he needs to finish this errand of connecting me and M Secondary School as soon as possible, otherwise he has to put it off until two weeks later when the inspection is complete. And he knows I do not want that. He had mentioned my request to Han several months ago in order not to be caught unprepared. Han had asked about my arrival time.

His mobile rings and he picks it up while driving. It is his colleague asking for the location of certain documents. He gives the number of the cupboard and adds that he will be back to the office soon. I do not plan to suggest running my errand another day, and he gets the message. The driving time is short, four or five minutes at most, albeit through heavy traffic.

With our car approaching the school gate, I become a bit nervous. I speak my mind: “Where shall we park? There is no vacant parking place left in the street. What if the gatekeeper comes and blocks us?”

He ignores my questions, because he needs to focus on parking, and the questions may sound silly to him.

There is a reason for my concern. Schools in China usually have closed campuses for the sake of safety and are usually strictly guarded, sometimes with armed policemen standing at the gate on special occasions (the Xinjiang Cut Cake provides one good example of why this can be necessary). For ordinary visitors to get access into the campus, one needs to talk first

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3Xinjiang Cut Cake: usually made with candied fruit, corn syrup, flour and nuts, Cut Cake is a traditional snack of the Uyghur ethnic group in Xinjiang Hotan. It is made in large blocks, and sold by cutting slices from the block, hence the name “cut cake”. Cut cake bought from Uyghur pedlars has developed a bad reputation because of the practice of cutting slices much larger than requested, followed by insistence on purchase of the entire piece. [Ramzy, Austin (5 December 2012). “Don’t Let Them Eat Cake: How Ethnic Tensions in China Explode on the Street”. Time. Retrieved 19 December 2014.] On 3 December 2012 the Yueyang Public Security Bureau posted a report on Sina Weibo about a brawl involving locals and Uyghur pedlars which ended with two people injured and the destruction of pedlars’ product. The post said that one local villager was detained, while the Uyghur pedlars were reimbursed 200,000RMB. [Guo Kai (6 December 2012). “Cashing in on fearful governments”. Global Times. Retrieved 19 December 2014.] The post resulted in a flood of internet commentary resentful of the favouritism shown to minority groups, exemplified by what was considered the exorbitant reimbursement price offered to the pedlars.
with the gatekeepers and have a good reason for visiting. M Secondary School is not an exception. I once had the experience of being blocked by one of the gatekeepers in this school, though I came with good intentions. It was two years ago when one of my nieces was attending school there. As her guardian at the time, I received a call from her head teacher telling me that I had been honourably selected by her as a member of the parents’ committee, and she was wondering whether I would like to take part. After realising that all I needed to do was to fill a form for my personal data, I accepted the ‘job’ with gratitude. I went to the school the next day to return the completed form, hoping to meet the teacher and find out more about my niece’s school performance. I did not call in advance for fear of disturbing the teacher in the event that they were busy teaching. I explained my intention to the gatekeeper but he blocked my entering, suggesting that I leave the form with him, noting that the school’s rules required that visitors be able to reach out to the potential receivers. Not having a strong desire to see the teacher, I followed his direction and left.

This reminiscence is interrupted by Feng’s parking move. He stops his car right in front of the industrial, automatic retractable school gate, which is about ten metres wide, with a one-piece bent frame of aerodynamic design. We wait in the car. Then, the gate slowly retracts and Feng drives through. I see a male figure of medium height in a deep blue security uniform coming out of the janitor’s room, eager to ask questions, but Feng misses him and keeps driving. Feng parks his car next to the gate of the teaching building. Facing the teaching building is a parking pool, which looks full.

“Can you park here?” I ask out of concern.

“The place where you can park depends on who you are,” he jokes.

We come out of the car with the gatekeeper four or five metres from us, still jogging and gesturing us to stop.

“What shall we say to him?”

I am not experienced.

“Chuang Jian Ban”, he murmurs twice to the uniformed gatekeeper, indicating no time for stopping or slowing down.
I am not sure that the gatekeeper heard him, but the moment I looked at him, he had stopped trying to enquire, as if he had not meant to ask anything. He turns back to the gatekeeper’s office beside the gate, shaking his head slightly. He has a round pale face.

Han’s office is on the third floor of an old but solid administrative building. This building was said to be the first one built on the campus in the early 1970s by the military forces stationed there. Because it was built almost fifty years ago, the quality, compared to those newly built, seems more durable. The cracks in the wall of other buildings on campus became evident later. When we enter Han’s office, I follow Feng. Han is talking with two other people. He stands up and warmly greets Feng. His office is not big and apparently, he shares it with someone else, as I see two working spaces. Near the door is a section for tea drinking: a wooden tea table, dark red, is surrounded by wooden sofas of the same colour, for about five or six people. On the table stands a set of tea things, with equipment for a tea ceremony.

Han kindly extends his welcome. Habitually I feel uncomfortable in front of strangers. My experience tells me that such an occasion can be political and I need to be attentive.

When we sit down, Han starts making tea for us. Then I recognise Mr Yu, one of the two people Han had been chatting with. In his early fifties, Yu is a teacher of English in this school and an acquaintance of my husband. We are both surprised. We exchange greetings and wonder how we have happened to meet there. Frequently, at leisure time, Yu comes to drink tea in Han’s office. Yu refers to Han as Da Ge and himself as Xiao Di. Da Ge and Xiao Di are literally translated as Big Brother and Little Brother, terms commonly used in the world of pugilism or in mafia society; Da Ge is usually conferred on the one who leads the team/organisation, and Xiao Di on the low-level guys in the organisation. The message here, at least conveyed by Yu, is too strong to miss: they are close friends. Once he knows what I am there for, he complains that I should first have gone to him for help, as it would be a small matter in his hands too.

“Yes, I should have,” I agree, “but since Feng had arranged everything, I don’t mean to trouble more people”.

All this time Han and Feng are joking with each other as to who is the real Leader. Leader here means a person holding a higher position in a hierarchical structure. Though Han is a principal, M Secondary School is under the charge of the local Bureau of Education. One of Feng’s jobs is to supervise and check all the local schools to get well prepared for the inspection. It is proper, therefore, to perceive Feng as a leader in terms of supervising the
school’s preparatory work. Han must have understood all this, and he hints that Feng should have been very busy, so it is unnecessary that he accompany me in person. “Plus,” he adds “such a young and beautiful female doctor is always welcome.”

At that diplomatic flirtation, I express my appreciation. It is obviously a chatting or socialising occasion where a long and possibly tedious talk about my PhD research may be ill-timed and self-centred. I briefly introduce my quest of completing a PhD thesis: I may need to sit in a class and a Teachers’ Office to find out about the schooling experiences of individuals; and, if possible, I would like to interview some school leaders and some teaching staff, and maybe one of the gatekeepers, at their convenience.

As expected, no one asks about my methodology or research methods, nor my research topic and questions. Several reasons are possible: they might not be interested in my research; they might have taken for granted that my research may be nothing different from that of those whom they might have entertained before—research focused on the test paper scores to see the quality of education; they might be willing to display their unconditional cooperation to my request to give Feng and myself “face”; they might think it improper to raise question to me in the first meeting.

Han explains that the Year 13 class might not be a good choice as the students are preparing for their gaokao, the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE). In China, gaokao can be the most future-determining not just for a student’s subsequent academic experience but also for the rest of their life, so Year 13 is a sensitive period.

I understand that well and I cannot insist. I add that Year 12 or Year 11 also works well for me. That said, Yu abruptly but warmly offers his class as my study subject, for he is the head teacher and he can help to arrange what I would like to do. He claims that he feels duty bound to help. I accept his offer with much gratitude. I cannot decline. Han also nods, probably seeing it as the most convenient way to invite me in.

Anyhow, I had all I needed to start my fieldwork: I had permission, orally, from Han, the Deputy Principal and the Secretary of the School Party Committee, who the next morning would like to introduce me to Lin, the Deputy Principal in charge of the senior section in the school; and Yu would introduce me to his class and his colleagues in the Teachers’ Office.

I am happy that Feng is busy, and we soon end our meeting. We leave with my preparation intact.
4.3. A Conversation on Guanxi

Monday, 8 December 2014, Teachers’ Office

What if I was without any guanxi? The conversation below between Mr Yu and I in the Teachers’ Office sheds light on that situation. The italics denote Mr Yu’s speech.

“To your knowledge, what would I probably end up with if I didn’t know Feng, or you and Han?”

Honestly? (I nod) *If you want to enter the school to do some research or survey, you must come with a reference letter from the superior administrative department in charge of schools. You must have the approval from them. Or you can imagine, what shall we do about the school safety once a stranger comes without any approval? It is like what happened in that Sydney Cafe, where a shooter came; but no one can be sure whether he has a gun or a dagger. What if he comes into the school and hurts someone, who should take that responsibility? So you cannot enter without approval from the authority thinking of the safety problem. First it is a concern of safety; second comes a concern of trust. Are you an honest person? What if we lose something after you come?*

“What if I give you my name card, or student card?”

(Laughing) *The name card? In China the swindlers work through name cards. As is known to all that a name card implies fake identity and contact (the Chinese words for name card, Mingpian, can be a pun meaning to cheat openly).*

“Well, how about a reference letter from The University of Auckland, and the document approved by the ethical committee…”

(He starts when I haven’t finished) *That letter, or recommendation or whatever you have. First of all, we don’t know that university and cannot be sure whether that university really exists. A school principal will think that way. For him, even if the university you mentioned is real, what about the documents or the recommendation letter? Are they genuine and honest, and legal? He has to verify. But how? Even though all those are verified, are we willing to accept you? You are the initiator while we seem to be in a passive position. Are we willing to be assessed by you? How inconvenient we feel working while you are here? What if you catch what goes on behind the scenes we don’t want others know? What you will present in your thesis? We are lucky and happy if the data work for our reputation, but what if not? So why should we accept you.*
“But we can have a confidential agreement.”

Well, whatever the confidentiality, a Principal must consider the aforementioned potentials. So if you want to come, get an approval from some superior authorities. And for that, you must have some guanxi ...It’s not hard to imagine that without proper guanxi how easily you get declined. They can say they there is no proper school in this area for your research, so why don’t you go and try some other district in this city? Or more politely, they don’t think they are qualified for your research, so please go and try some schools with better performance ...Or even if you got luck and they agree to assist, which school you can go might be another story. Say, what if a school to which you need to spend two hours or more on commuting? In my case, without knowing your husband, I would not take this extra trouble supervising you. But Han can point one for you...

I went and tried the local notarial office, but found that there is no international service for what I need to verify my researcher’s identity as Yu described.
Chapter Five: The Local Context and Field School

5.1. M City

Located near the South China Sea, M City is known for its beautiful long coastline, waving palm trees, open spaces, low population density and its many islands, but most of all for its being a Special Economic Zone (SEZ) in China for economic reform experiments since early in 1980. Up until the 1970s M City was a group of fishing villages with a population of around 100,000; by 2014 it had risen to 1.5 (million), with GDP per capita 115,900 RMB (approximately US $19,000) (M City Bureau of Statistic, 2015, March 13). Among these 1.5 million people, 0.90 million are local residents with local hukou, with the rest regarded as floating population. This population is small by Chinese standards.

Hukou is a record in Chinese government system of household registration required by law in mainland China. It determines where citizens are allowed to live. Because of its entrenchment of social strata, especially as between rural and urban residency status, the hukou system is often regarded as a form of caste system (Bell, 2010, p. 86; Marková & Gillespie 2008, p. 63; Perry & Selden, 2003, p. 90). Having one’s household registration coincide with one’s place of residency is very important as it determines one’s access to economic, social and political opportunities and rights. To be specific, under this system some 700-800 million people are in effect treated as second-class citizens, deprived of the opportunity to settle legally in cities, and deprived of access to most of the basic welfare and state-provided services enjoyed by regular urban residents. Also known as Migrant Workers in China, floating population are people working in cities but without local hukou.

While many cities select rapid industrialisation as an engine of economic growth, M City is thought of as an exception, working to suppress industrialisation in order to reserve its high-quality city environment for sustainable development. This leads M City, in 1998, to be the third city in China to be recognised by the United Nations as the Best Model of International Residential Environment Improvement. M City found itself faced with a serious shortage of talent and professionals during its dramatic expansion. The local government has taken initiatives to set up a university park, with an area of 20 square kilometres, the only one in the western Pearl River Delta. More than ten nationally famous universities have built their branch campus or independent institutes here. It is reported that the proportion of university
students in M City is approximately 7.99% (Zhao, 2015, July 14; gd.sina.com.cn, 2014, March 31).

When considering compulsory education, M City was the first in China to introduce twelve-year compulsory education. Attending senior high school became mandatory under city law in M City, beginning in autumn of 2007, with the local government aiming to become competitive in terms of schooling and education. When it comes to gaokao (National College Entrance Examination/NCEE), students in M City can have a very high rate of college admission, because the previously listed universities provide preferential treatment for M City local students—a big discount, both in tuition fees and admission standard. But these benefits can only be enjoyed by people with local hukou. When it comes to the classroom, M City can afford to have a class size as ‘small’ as only 40-45 students. I need to use quotation marks around ‘small’ because it is not so if compared internationally, nor is it small to those gradually disappearing village schools in today’s rural area in China. But it is small compared to what I have seen in my hometown, Z City.

These figures may not mean much without comparison.

I was born in Z City, Henan Province, where Chinese civilisation originated, and where there is the densest population in China. Z City area covers 11,959 square kilometres, with a population of 11.4 million (The People’s Government of Henan Province, 2013, March 19). By 2015 the GDP per capita in Z City was 19,742 RMB (approximately US $2,850) (The People’s Government of Henan Province, 2015, March 4). Life in Z City is lively, with its convenient bustling market and diverse street foods, and for most people, cozy with family and friends. Yet we need to spend our winter—long, dry and bone-chilling, when it is sometimes -10 degrees Celsius—with no heating and hot water.

This is fine once we get used to it, but when it comes to schooling, it would look like this: Our children are going to local “quality” schools where class size can be as high as 100, and the parents may need to have guanxi (social network) to squeeze their only child in. Parents, might occasionally go to the school to leave an umbrella for the child on rainy days, to be happily greeted by their child sitting at the back door with half of the body sticking out of the door, having difficulty squeezing himself into the classroom. This may exist only in the city area.

Our youth in their high school are allowed to have only five or six hours sleeping time every day, and they are supposed to have only one day of rest from schooling per month, to
compete in gaokao. For a city with 11 million people, we have only one four-year state-run university. And it is not a secret that China’s best schools (Peking University and Tsinghua in Beijing, or Fudan University in Shanghai, for example) give preference to students who have local hukou (Zhang, 2010; Kuo, 2013, June 7). Some parents frown, but submit, having no other options; more parents resign themselves to encouraging their teenagers with the famous ancient Chinese poem: “宝剑锋从磨砺出，梅花香自苦寒” (which can literally mean “Honing gives a sharp edge to a sword, and bitter cold adds keen fragrance to plum blossom”, or “No cross, no crown”). A popular retort for parents to a child’s complaints of their bleak school life: “you are born in Henan”. The Dahe News, a popular newspaper in Henan, comments on 10 March 2015:

Everyone knows that Henan suffers from geographic discrimination, not just in gaokao. The vicious circle persists that it’s better to be born in the city than the countryside, and it’s better to be born in Beijing than Henan.

Before leaving Z City I took all the above for granted, assuming it might be all the same elsewhere, as do most Z City people. This has been the daily grind, so no problems arise from the people, or from the local media. These might be contextualised as not being generalisable; they are, therefore, likely to be ignored by our scholars. But leaving one’s birthplace and settling down in another place was almost impossible before the 1990s and can still be extremely difficult for ordinary Chinese even now. This is where ‘hukou’ comes into play. For a vantage point that will give a glimpse into the landscape of Chinese social life, the reader needs to be acquainted with this term, from which other conditions for local schooling probably germinate.

5.2. Compulsory Conditions for “Compulsory” Schooling

Not all in mainland China can be eligible for compulsory education. To be enrolled for most local primary schools requires certain conditions. The better the school seems, the more restricted and higher the requirements for enrolment. This section examines the terms ‘hukou’, ‘Family Planning Service Certificate (FPSC)’, ‘property ownership certificate’, all of which are closely associated with schooling in M City, providing the necessary context within which the cases are studied.

5.2.1. Hukou system

China’s hukou system registers each person at a special place (usually their birthplace) and defines the individual’s household status in terms of residence location (a specific city, town
or township) and type (either agricultural or non-agricultural) (Chan & Buckingham, 2008). Only those with a local hukou are entitled to education, medical, certain jobs, housing, grain, and other services in cities (Hang & Selden, 1994). Faced with massive protest against the inequality caused by the hukou system, authorities have in recent years pushed for a residence permit system paired with a migrant scoring mechanism to address shortfalls associated with the hukou. The regulation would institute eligibility guidelines for a residence permit to require individuals to show evidence that they have continuously lived in a locale for at least six months and have regular employment. Under the proposal, qualified candidates can also apply for hukou in the city in which they reside, depending on the size of the city and how long they have lived there. In megacities with populations of more than 5 million, applicants for local household registration need to meet much stricter requirements in terms of employment background, housing ownership, as well as contributions to social security funds.

In M City, the population census in 2014 (Bureau of Statistics, M City) shows that of approximately 1.50 million people, approximately 950,000 are residential and 510,000 are floating population (including 4,378 foreigners). To increase the real estate economy, the local government had adopted a policy that outsiders who purchase properties, for example an apartment over 70 square metres, can apply for local hukou. It is out of financial concern in terms of social welfare and public schooling that M City provides its residents that the city government stopped the policy of issuing local hukou to those property buyers, because M City is popular in China and many people want to have local hukou.

5.2.2. Family Planning Service Certificate
The Family Planning Service Certificate (FPSC), together with some other documents, works in conjunction with hukou system to signify that each child is properly registered. Under the national one-child policy, in order to get the child properly registered for the hukou system, a pregnant mother was expected to notify the community Family Planning Office about her pregnancy and apply for a certificate permitting the birth of the baby. In order to register with hukou, each child, after the birth, must have proper documentation from the local Family Planning department and a medical birth certificate, which are submitted after birth registration, as well as valid identification of the parents. The FPSC is one of the documents.

While the State Family Planning Bureau sets specific expectations for the one-child policy, local family planning departments are in charge of implementation within their own regions.
This has led to a wide variation from province to province in the system that governs incentives and penalties used to regulate Chinese families.

One main function of the FPSC is to record the quarterly Type-B ultrasonic inspection which mothers are required to undertake in order to be checked regarding the coil/cervical cerclage or pregnancy congruent with the one-child policy. In M City, an approval letter from the local Family Planning Office is one of the required documents for a child’s enrolment. To issue that letter, the Office is required to check records in the mother’s FPSC. Although some research has proved that wearing a coil can cause gynaecological problems, the Chinese mothers, for the sake of the child’s schooling, do not seem to have any option. Apart from the time needed for the inspection, the experience of withholding urine to do the Type-B ultrasonic inspection can be uncomfortable and embarrassing.

People have been annoyed by local policies, and during the writing of the case study several media sources published articles raising complaints, as May and June are months for preparing children for their enrolment into primary school. One point tactfully made by the media is about the essential conflict between policies of different levels of administration and government institutions. For example, the Ministry of Education expressly prohibited compulsory schooling being bundled together with the Family Planning Service Certificate, but Regulation 74 (2014) from the GD Province Commission of Population and Family Planning specifies that educational institutions are also branch organisations of Family Planning Commission and, therefore, should assume the responsibility of supervising the implementation of family birth control.

Schools, therefore, and primary schools in particular, are supposed to carry out the supervision and report what they find to the local Commission of Population and Family Planning. Asking for the FPSC at the beginning of every semester has been a usual practice for schools in M City.

Though on October 29th, 2015 the Communist Party finally ended the “one-child policy” and now couples will be allowed to have two, I still include FPSC in the thesis because I see in essence the new policy brings no change as the party still insists that it has the right to control people’s fertility.
5.2.3. Property ownership certificate

The school enrolment policy in M City stipulates that the children must go to the nearest school, and most state-run schools require that the family should own a property in the school zone. Most also decree the information recorded in the property ownership certificate be in congruence with one’s hukou registration. Without having a property in the schooling zone, one has to go through a very cumbersome application procedure to go to school, which can make purchasing a property an ostensibly wiser choice. The average housing price in M City is approximately 14,000 RMB per square metre, the highest being around 50,000RMB in the city centre, and the lowest 5000 RMB, in relatively remote areas. Average house prices have been increasing. It has been reported that in cities like Beijing, one is not eligible to purchase a local property without local hukou.

5.3. The Field School

In the west of M City is a green mount—Mount M. M Town was built around its foot. The mount is not a high one and the trees there are not huge, but it moves through many shades of green throughout the year, with a pleasant climate and adequate sun and rainfall. Walking in the mount road is pleasurable. As a result of radical economic development, several avenues have recently been built around Mount M. These roads are wide enough to hold four traffic lanes in each direction and have a green area of three to five metres in width as the isolation strip in the middle. In the green belt are flowers and plants, carefully selected to ensure road scenery, decorated with plant sculptures and blazing with colour. Compared to the middle of mainland China, this area is relatively advanced.

At the southern side of Mount M lies a road named Spruce Road. If compared with those recently built roads, Spruce Road looks aged and shabby. The bituminous road is about 20 metres wide, marked into four lanes in two directions, without anything in the middle. Only the middle two lanes are available for transportation, as the other two function as parking lots, which most of the time are fully used. Most vehicles are Honda, Toyota, Ford, Buick, Peugeot, Volkswagen, and occasionally there are BMW, Mercedes Benz, Audi and Lexus. Means of transportation are various: buses, coaches, cars, goods vans, dumping trucks, motorcycles, electric bicycles and bicycles. In the city area, for the sake of traffic security, dumping trucks, motorcycles and electric bicycles are not allowed to run, and bicycles can run only in green lanes. Every year the relevant government agencies confiscate thousands of motorcycles and electric bicycles, but these two forms of transport are still popular on Spruce
Road. Most motorcycles are used for business, which is against the government regulations, and people call them motor taxis. Motor and electrical bike riders pay little heed to the rules of the road and they roar when they are stopped by others. The squeal of brakes and the angry blowing of bus horns make up the daily belligerent helter-skelter tempo.

Figure 1. A scene from Spruce Road.

Spruce Road is lined with four- or five-floored buildings, both for commercial and residential use. That is, the ground floor rooms are rented out for storefronts. The fronts of the stores are economically painted and decorated, and only the ground floor facade. The sides of the buildings are in colours of their raw materials: some are bricks of dark chestnut, some tiny stones of light brown, all mottled and dirt-stained.

The thick mango trees along the roadsides make the road seem time-honoured, and, if observant, one will notice its special nature. As well as a diversity of stores, there are many governmental offices along this road: the Office for Water Supplies, for Electricity, District Notary’s Office, and Local Office for Birth Control, Local Welfare Bureau, Post Office, Office for Telecommunication, Office for China Mobile, and offices for the four Chinese public banks. These symbolise the central status of this road in the town. But two bank offices have put out official notices advising people that they will soon be moving to the
newly built commercial centre nearby, probably a signal that this is becoming an abandoned town centre.

The stream of people and vehicles is eager to tell the tale of a burgeoning immigrant city. Passers on the road are from all over China and some of them still keep their hometown style of dress. On sunny winter days, some people are wearing thin down jackets while some others are in t-shirts, some in several layers of trousers, while some are in shorts. Those few who wear slippers, bare footed throughout the year, are the local natives, most of whom are over 60 and fond of yum cha—a local custom of having breakfast in southern China.

Located at the middle of Spruce Road, M Secondary School might be the same age as the road. Official information about the school is available from the school website:

M Middle School covers an area of 45,000 square metres with the gross area of 22,000 square metres. The school owns three separate sections: the teaching area, the sports area and the dormitory area. The school currently runs 48 classes, among which 30 are for junior middle school (Years 7-9) and 18 are for senior middle school (Years 10-12). The student number is 2200. The school has the following teaching infrastructure: an assembly hall equipped with multimedia machines and with about 300 seats; an electronic reading room with 30 computers; three standardised computer classrooms; three lab rooms for physics; 2 lab rooms for chemistry; 1 lab room for biology; a school library with about 60,000 books; a plastic playground with a 300-metre track; a football field and ten basketball courts. Currently there are 182 teaching and administrative staff: among 152 teachers, two have the title of National Excellent Teachers; 7 are training candidates for provincial leading teachers; 1 has been appointed as city famous teacher; 5 are district leaders in their chosen field of teaching; 4 are members of the local District Academic Committee; 54 are senior teachers, 76 are teachers of the first level professionals; the qualification rate is 100%.

“Survive with quality and develop with characteristics” has long been the schooling management principle for M School. With a school motto of “patriotism, discipline, diligence and innovation”, the M school has always aimed to vigorously implement quality oriented education/education for all-round development. The educational philosophy here is to lay the foundation for students’ lifelong development and the
schooling aims to created student-oriented classrooms with personalised pedagogy and curriculum. With feet on the ground, the M School strives hard to promote a schooling spirit of “unity, integrity, courtesy and progression”. The school has obtained itself a good reputation in the community with an innovative management and entrepreneurship.

The layout of the school is a telling comment on a stunning boom in the progress of several fishing villages growing into a modern city. Probably written specifically for the school’s prospectus, M School’s campus is described as now consisting of three independent areas: the dormitory, campus and sport area. The main campus is tightly surrounded by residential housing, the sports area has to be built in the other side of the road exactly opposite to the school gate, and the dormitory area is six or seven minutes’ walking distance on the same side of the main campus. Our tour starts from the dorm area.
Chapter Six: Life in M School

6.1. The Dormitory

For boarding students, daily life starts at around 6 a.m. Things are easier for boys when it comes to washing up and using the toilet, as they don’t need to queue. Some assiduous students, boys and girls from Year 9 and Year 12, will get up earlier to study for the coming critically decisive entrance examinations. Year 9s compete for high school, while year 12s compete for college or university entrance.

With the young boys and girls in their uniforms flooding out of the dorm gate at about 6:30 a.m., Spruce Road awakens too. The street looks fresh and tidy as the cleaning workers have done their third cleaning in a day at 11 p.m. The traffic at this time is not heavy; most people coming and going are on their way to a nearby morning market, buying or selling.

Looking at the school from outside the gate, one can see at the far end of the yard two buildings of steel and concrete, one of five floors and the other of four floors, standing against the foot of Mount M. They are of simple structure—eight dormitory rooms in a row, with a public corridor (see Figure 2). The higher building is sandy white and the other greyish white. Standing shoulder to shoulder, their facades suggest their different ages. They are for boarding boys and girls, separately. The ground floor of the sandy white, the younger one on the left, is empty, a tradition in the local area because of the damp weather. A dozen canteen tables, not at all new, some steel and some plastic, in light but mismatched colours, sit sparsely on the right-hand side of the space. This is a symbol for the school canteen, where several benches, I heard, have been out of order.
I hear several fragmented comments about the canteen.

One school leader says, during a short conversation:

_The Principal is responsible for the school canteen. The business has been outsourced. One of the deputy principals takes the responsibility for security affairs. But one evening last month when I went to do a casual inspection, I found the kitchen door open. I got a bit angry. All those cutting and chopping knives were laying on the chopping board; and to me those made for a certain hidden risk for our students’ safety._

A 17-year-old boy from Class 6, Year 10, comments:

_I seldom eat in our canteen. It is luck that our living area is independent from the teaching area. So there is no way to round us up. I heard that in other schools, the students are not allowed to go out for their meals. So they don’t have options but to eat at their school canteen. The food in our canteen is, how to say, not very tasty and a bit expensive._

A comment from another 17-year-old boy, Class 6, Year 10:

_Not many of us eat at the canteen, though there are enough seats. Some girls may do because the nearby food stores are always crowded at eating time. I heard some parent saying that the food in the school canteen might be safer; I guess they think so_
because they never get a chance to have a taste of the food there. The parents’ thinking stays in their own time.

A two-storey construction stands vertical to the lower and older four-floor dormitory building. Though negligible, shabby and outdated, this is the oldest construction, having in the past several decades watched the expansion of this area. Judging from the clothes hung up there, the rooms upstairs must have been used for staff dormitories, and the downstairs space is now the kitchen area. About the dormitory staff, I hear this from one school leader:

All the cleaning and dorm staff now are casual workers. They are from the local human resource agency, so they don’t have much relationship with our school.

And from one school gatekeeper:

Among our security guys, only one of us has Bianzhi⁴ (similar to “tenure” or permanent contract) and he is working in the dormitory area. His monthly payment is about six times or more of ours.

The gate is approximately eight metres wide of steel and is auto-retractable. From the gate, one can get a panoramic view of this yard. The most appealing scene, to my eyes, is that of several layers of corridors from the two dormitory buildings at the other far end. The corridor space I can see from outside of the gate is above the 1.60-metre-high solid concrete balcony wall; it seems always crowded with greyish blue school uniforms, hung in the air, waiting to dry. Because of the local damp weather, without a laundry drier, the wet clothes take several days to dry—with luck. The uniforms are always there except for summer and winter holidays. They constitute a symbolic image, and strong; the stories behind it, I assume, may be rich.

Behind the blue wooden door to the dormitory room is an area less than 20 square metres. It holds three bunk beds, iron frame with wooden board, for six people. In the middle of the room usually stands a public table, which, according to the school rules, can hold only books. Personal belongings stay in plain in-wall cupboards. For water, thermos bottles are provided and students need to go to the ground floor to get a drink of water.

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⁴ Bianzhi usually refers to the authorised number of personnel in a unit, office or organisation and is normally translated as “establishment” (Brødsgaard, K. E., 2012). It is a way to understand how the mechanism of personnel management works under the Organization Department of the Chinese Communist Party—a department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China that controls staffing positions within the CCP. Because the People’s Republic of China is a one-party state, the Organization Department has an enormous amount of control over personnel within the People’s Republic of China and is, therefore, one of the most important organs of the CCP; it is one of the key agencies of the Central Committee, along with the Central Propaganda Department and International Liaison Department.
Nothing else then. Electric cooking appliances, actually any electric appliances, are not allowed in the dormitory room, in order to avoid accidents which might be caused by fire. A group of students, given the name ‘discipline inspection department’, do the daily inspection and make a record of the violators. Under the charge of Student Affairs Office of the school, this inspecting group is a branch of the Students’ Union. They also check whether people abide by the school rules during the noon nap and night sleeping time.

When asked about the living conditions in the dormitories, both students and teachers shake their heads with resignation, unwilling to talk in detail.

About our dormitories, we have the worst. One of my former classmates changed his mind after schooling here two weeks, dropped out and went to a vocational technical secondary school. He is a boy! And he could not handle the hostile conditions in our dormitories.

From a 17-year-old female student, Class 6:

The first lesson I learned here is not to drink water in the evening. I stay on the third floor and the toilets are in the second and fourth floor. If in the middle of the night I go to the toilet, I have to go through the corridor and then upstairs, and sometimes I bump into the rubbish bin and I will unavoidably disturb others’ sleeping. But sometimes I feel thirsty so the first thing in the morning for me is to drink water.

From a 17-year-old female student, Class 6:

In our dormitory, it is better that six of us can work out an order for everything, say who is on duty for fetching hot drinking water and who is on duty for cleaning and what is the order for taking shower. Each day we have warm shower water from six to seven in the evening and there are six of us.

From a 17-year-old female student, Class 6:

For those who graduated from this school, we are luckier than them. I heard that it was from last year that we can have warm shower water in winter. I don’t know how those people can handle the shower in cold water in winter. But to tell the truth, the shower time is too limited. Especially in summer time when we need to take a shower every day.

From a 17-year-old female student, Class 6:

I love to have long hair. I don’t understand why I cannot have long hair. It is I who take care of my hair and I don’t see my hair bothering any others. But to be honest, washing my hair is a headache because other people might be waiting outside and we
have very limited time and warm water for shower. And my hair takes longer time to dry.

From a 17-year-old female student, Class 6:

From the dorm gate and the school gate it is about 5 minutes’ walking distance to four stationery stores and eight food stores, inclusive of two bakeries. At 7 a.m. only three of them are open, two providing steamed vermicelli rolls and one Fujian Shaxian snacks. They, apparently, do not have enough space for the upsurge of the school uniformed people, so only a small number can sit and enjoy their warm breakfast. The two bakeries never need to worry about business because in the half an hour between 6:40 to 7:10 a.m. almost nothing will be left, all swept away by the young students. For some other students, the two breakfast trolleys, about 100 metres away from the school gate, although crude and simple, are quite helpful. One sells steamed buns and the other plain rice rolls, all taken away in plastic bags or disposable food packs with chopsticks. Very occasionally, several people choose to go in the opposite direction, to a breakfast food store further afield, to relax and enjoy a warm breakfast, with the added pleasure of being rebellious and skipping the morning reading.

6.2. “Sign-in” and Office Hours

8 December 2015, 7:50 a.m., at the gate of M Middle School.

The school gate is wide open now for the flood of students and teachers from both sides. After eight hours of night shift, the gatekeeper, while gathering his strength for the last chore on duty, might be hoping that his colleague for the next shift can arrive on time, at 8 a.m. Not knowing what is waiting ahead, habitually, I stop at the school gate, wondering what is going on here at this time of a day.

Standing facing the school gate at the other side of Spruce Road, I can see inside the school gate only one side of the First Teaching Building (First TB) and an in-campus parking pool in front of the First TB. The First TB stands vertically next to the school retractable gate, opposite to the janitor’s office at the other end of the gate. It runs from the foot of Mount M, the very east edge of the campus, to Spruce Road, the west edge of the campus. The lounge of this building, therefore, serves as the real school gate as it is the only way for the campus to seat all the school units. A grey concrete passage, the same width as the school gate, runs in front of the First TB. The other side of the passage is the school parking pool, also in grey concrete. About 30 parking lots are there, always fully occupied during school time. The lounge is guarded with a plain iron gate, and now there is a wooden desk before the iron gate.
A man is sitting behind it. He is Mr Lin, the Deputy Principal in charge of the senior section. In a suit, silver grey, and tie, he sits leaning back against the chair with his hand in his trouser pocket and one of his legs stretching out. Two or three metres away to his upper right-hand side stands a male teacher. His arms are folded firmly on his chest, medium height, in a deep brown cotton casual jacket and blue pants. He is a middle-aged teacher, probably middle level management staff, too.

They are facing the school gate and examining the stream of students, occasionally talking with each other. Only when a teacher-like man goes to the desk and bends a bit to write something roughly in an exercise book—maybe tasks to be completed—do I figure out what they are there for. They might be inspecting the teachers’ attendance. In the next few minutes, several more teachers arrive; some greet briefly the two school leaders and sign in, some just sign and pass.

Several days later I find out that the teaching staff here are required to stay in the office for an extra five or six hours in addition to the two hours of teaching workload. I have tried the office hours myself and found it exhausting, without teaching. Below are excerpts from my informal interviews with two teachers on their opinion of the office hours. I name them Teacher A and Teacher B, both male head teachers.

Teacher A is in his early fifties and sounds adroit in dealing with my questions.

“If the teachers have to be in every weekday, how do they settle the problems in their daily life, I mean problems outside their schooling job?”

A: What kind of problems?

“Family things. For example, what if the child or the parent needs tending to?”

A: One can ask for personal leave.

“Without deduction of the monthly income?”

A: Not in the past. But yes now. It is regulated by the Labour Law.

“Well, what if one just leaves?”

A: Absence will cause, according to the law, more deduction in your pay. But many laws can be null, like Teachers Law. It has been regulated that teachers’ income should at least be no less than that of the civil servants.

“Don’t we have more or less the same here in M City?”

A: They have Traffic Grants, several thousand RMB; do you have that? They have Housing Subsidy, another several thousands; do you have that?
“Does it mean that the teachers have to solve their problems of daily life in the weekends? But all other institutions will close on weekends?”

A: Sometimes people slip out. But to the school leaders, those problems should be personal affairs; so they should be solved out of working time. Every organisation has this attendance mechanism. The Disciplinary Committee is working on this to stop people leaving their duty earlier than they should. It is made very clear that when on duty, the teachers are not allowed to chat, or go to other’s office, nor play games. However, the school leaders will find a way to hint us in case the inspectors are coming. We will behave correspondingly.

“I don’t understand the point of keeping teachers all day in the office.”

A: (He smiles.) Well, you are paid to be here. In their (the school leader’s) eyes, you cannot accomplish your job if they don’t confine you in the office. Why? You need to prepare for your class, work on writing your lesson plan and teaching plan, marking the students’ exercise books...

“Are you telling me that we are doing a job that seems endless?”

A: It is not that the job is endless; it depends on how you work on it. People sit in the office, but does it mean that they are all working there? (He must sense what he assumes as inappropriate in his talking and tried to make it up.) The PowerPoints we use in the class have been made ready and there are abundant resources from the internet these days. Of course, each class is different as you face different students and they give different reaction and therefore, you must teach with different focus.

“Does it mean that the teachers cannot get off work?”

A: Well, even if in after work time, you need to think about your job. A conscientious teacher in Chinese schooling system cannot get off work, especially a head teacher. A head teacher to the students is like the parent whose mobile is always on. I switch off my mobile after 11 p.m. in the evening and set it automatically on at 5 a.m., merely in case there is any urgent call from the children and their parents. Occasionally a head teacher is a babysitter; once a kid leaves home early while being absent from schooling, I need to look for him. In some other situation, a head teacher can be a detective working on clearing a case, say a theft in the dormitory. (He laughs lightly, probably intrigued by some interesting memory.)

Teacher B is in his forties and sees this a bit differently.

“So we don’t have a staff canteen but we are required to do the office hours?”
B: The office hours require the teachers to sign in before 7:50 a.m.; if you, like me, get bad luck and become a head teacher, you are required to sign in before 7:20 a.m. to supervise the morning reading in the classroom. Then you teach and stay in the office. Those who have no teaching for the fourth class in the morning are officially allowed to leave at 11:30. Here comes the problem: when can you go and buy some vege? Even if you can go to the market and get some veges, when can you cook a lunch? We have to sign in before 2:20 p.m. So most of our teachers have to grab a bite at the food stall nearby; it seems fine if one does so for several days, but it is quite irritating to have to live like that year after year. As is known, no guarantee for the food safety; we also worry about our own health. Another problem is that not all teachers are single. There are couples both teaching in our school. And they have a child; so who should look after the child if they both work? I mean, we are allowed to leave at 5:30 p.m. in the afternoon and if you have duty for the night class, and we have one night duty in a week, you need to stay at the class from 7:30 to 9:50 in the evening. So the babysitting has been problematic, much less to talk about having some quality family life together with the kid. Behind this office hours system are huge problems and they (the authority) are blind to our real problems. What’s the fucking use shouting slogans like ‘develop balanced education’! (He laughs loudly at himself, at his bad words, and falls quickly into silence.)

We talked about the term ‘balanced education’ and he became a bit agitated. When he calms down I bring up the office hours again and ask: “What is the reply that the teacher will get if we raise the problems to the school leaders?” He is either very into his own thinking or unready for my question, he asks me to repeat my question.

B: Well, they tell you that they can do nothing. They will claim that our school is rural school, so we cannot compare with those urban ones. They suddenly have good reason for the imbalance when it comes to our daily practical difficulty; but it is always balanced when they ask from us the student’s achievement....We are required to do this office hours thing simply to follow the schools in the city area (which are doing this); we are doing so for the administrative (the authority) to show their executive power. But one thing they (the authority) ignore is that our school lacks the resources those city schools enjoy. Teachers in those schools enjoy free and quality breakfast, and they are provided with rich lunch and good supper at very reasonable
price. That solves a big problem. Look at us, what the shit we get! We are willing to raise the problem, but before you raise your voice, you get rebuked by the Principal.

6.3. The Lounge

In the middle of the ground floor of the First TB is a lounge, equipped with a wrought iron gate (see Figure 3). Most of the time, it serves as effective access control. The gate closes punctually at 7:40 a.m. and 2:10 p.m., usually with two student cadres standing guarding the gate and one sitting behind a desk to have people registered for lateness. The red silk belt the student cadres wear distinguishes them from the late-comers. Sometimes a queue of late-comers forms (see Figure 3). There are stories that some naughty latecomers get others’ names registered, so the latecomers now need to have their student cadres in order to enter. But still there are stories telling how smart the young people can be; if they know which student cadres are on duty, they will build guanxi with the cadres and then they can benefit from that leverage.

![Figure 3. Student cadres processing a line of students alongside gate to lounge.](image)

Because it is a place everyone has to pass by, this has become a golden belt for advertisements, since school is used to propagate images helping to forge role models among the students and sometimes teachers. Colourful pictures of ‘good’ students are presented here (see Figure 4). They are the top students in the last final-term examination, who scored the highest respectively for total marks and marks for each course.
Figure 4. A colourful poster of good students and their marks, displayed outside the lounge.

Once in a while there are notices of good news on the bulletin board on the wall—for example, showing that the school football team won third place in a match, or the School Wushu Team won a prize. And, of course, it is the place for statements of punishments for group fighting, for cheating in examinations etc. These notices stay on the bulletin board in the upper half of the wall for several days, while those pictures of the top students stay for a whole semester.

Anecdote 1

One day an A3-sized form appears in the middle of the wall. It is about the school’s financial situation. The form lists how much money the school receives from the local government for a school year, how much money is left, and where the money goes. I do not feel it proper to stop and look at it in the daytime, but one day I have a careful look at it at about 9 p.m. in the evening, after I finish my interview of one student. Financial issues have been a sensitive topic in almost all institutions now as the central government has vowed to fight corruption and crack down on both ‘tigers’ and ‘flies’—powerful leaders and lowly bureaucrats or petty officialdom.

A male teacher in his late fifties, who must have come for his shift for the night classes, passes and stops beside me and asks:

I heard that you are here to do research, can you do some research on this?
I smile back and keep watching the form, while thinking how to react. He starts pointing his fingers on a specific section on the form displaying the expenditure and comments:

*Everyone is able to make these figures.*

I nod to show my understanding. He pauses and grins and hesitates but finally speaks:

*‘No border and no taboo, but zero tolerance’ sounds fantastic and quite determined in the war against corruption, but immediately gone is our shit annual reward for hard work in gaokao.*

He quotes the phrase from the latest communiqué of the mid-January meeting of the Party leaders. He must have meant to talk more, but anyhow he shakes his head and leaves with a murmur to himself:

*This is China.*

Anecdote 2

The other day a circular appeared listing the names of teachers’ representatives and the time for a yearly teaching staff congress. About 50 names are on the list. I notice that the meeting time is at 3:30 in the afternoon. When I arrive at the Teachers’ Office I ask: what if the teachers’ representatives are giving classes at that time. And this reply follows:

*Don’t take that serious. It is a show and people know it is a show.*

Anecdote 3

In winter, the campus starts getting dark at around 6 p.m. For my first interview, I arrive at around 7:10 p.m.—twenty minutes before the beginning of the night classes and the interview, to see what the campus looks like at that hour. Lit by the cold, white street lights, the school gate area feels pale but busy with the students—some alone, others in groups, some exuberant, some despondent, almost all in their oversized greyish-blue sport jackets. The school gate is wide open at that time to allow students to enter, with one gatekeeper standing guard by the window of the janitor’s office. Out of courtesy, I go to say ‘hi’ to the gatekeeper, and he nods, allowing me to enter the premises.

The bulb above the wrought-iron gate to the lounge is orange, serving as an interface between the brightness of the street light and the darkness of the campus. Leaving the lounge, while my eyes gradually adjust to the darkness, my ears are riveted to the sound of a bouncing basketball.
I know that to my left-hand side are two newly built outdoor plastic basketball courts, but it takes me a while to mark several silhouettes on that field. I do not hear them speak, which amazes me. How can they manage to shoot without talking, or perhaps they are just practising, I think to myself while walking forward. I do not stop because my attention has been absorbed by two teams of badminton players in front the Third TB. They are playing in the shadowy light borrowed from the classroom in the second floor. They might be talking while wielding the racket, trying to hit the feather shuttle, but I cannot see the shuttle at all.

I have to take several deep breaths, thinking what meanings I can make out of this. I have to brace myself to go on.

6.4. Flag-raising Ceremony

“A full-time middle school or primary school shall hold a Flag-hoisting ceremony once a week, except during vacations.”—The Law of the People’s Republic of China on the National Flag (Adopted at the 14th Meeting of the Standing Committee of the Seventh National People’s Congress on June 28, 1990, promulgated by Order No. 28 of the President of the People’s Republic of China on June 28, 1990 and effective as of October 1, 1990)

Coming out of the Lounge one enters a campus sports area where the weekly flag-raising ceremony is held. As required by the state regulations, the school holds the national flag-raising ceremony on every Monday morning at 7:20, before morning reading time. I manage to get up early and arrive at the school gate at about 7:18 a.m. Many students pass, grabbing a quick breakfast from the street breakfast vendors.

All the teachers, all the head teachers at least are required to sign in before 7:20 a.m. on Monday; all the students convene and line up by class at their allocated area on the basketball court in front of the Third Teaching Building. Year 7, 8 and 9 students are standing in front of the Year 10, 11 and 12 students. Several student cadres, one for each grade, skilfully count the number of the students in each class and take the register, which can be used as a reason for deduction of marks. The student cadres from each class, usually the cadres for discipline, quickly count heads in his/her own class and find out who is absent and report to the class monitor or the head teacher. Experienced head teachers usually appoint at least two cadres of discipline, one boy and one girl, under whom several group leaders and dorm leaders are assigned. Counting the heads in this large group is done promptly before 7:30 a.m., and the head teachers, if interested, can have the names of the absentees.
The school leaders take turns to preside over the whole ceremony. It is Principal Zhang today. The ceremony starts at 7:20 a.m. and is performed by a flag-raising team of six students: four hold the flag, one plays the music and one raises the flag. The boy who pulls the string has timed it very well—the flag is raised to the top of the pole the second the anthem is finished. This weekly repeated ceremony starts in preschool for these students. It is not such a routine that people salute the flag, and I hear no singing of the anthem. Approximately 2,400 young boys and girls in their school uniforms, standing quietly, do look solemn. They do not move at all during that one or two minutes as the flag is raised. After that, some of them start rubbing their eyes; some even shut their eyes. Two or three head teachers move from the front to the side and stand leaning against the trees. Several students who have not finished their simple breakfast, a piece of bread or bun, furtively put the food into their mouth while carefully watching their teachers’ moves. At the very back of the flock stand the students from Year 12, who are preparing for gaokao. Not surprisingly, two or three are holding a book in their hand, memorising English words.

After the anthem, the Principal gives a talk on the importance of receiving the forthcoming National Balanced-Education Inspection, some awards are distributed, and a female student, apparently intimidated, reads a speech in Mandarin with strong local accent, calling on her peers to behave in a civilised manner.

The ceremony finishes at about 7:45 a.m. Quietly and in a well-trained manner, the classes of Years 7, 8 and 9 turn back and head for the First and Second TB, one after another from the left-hand side, while the classes of Years 10, 11 and 12 head from the right-hand side for their classroom in the Third TB, which stands parallel with the First TB at the other end of the campus. All in good order (see Figure 5) and in two or three minutes, 48 classes have gone back to the classrooms. The campus resumes its silence until Big Break time.
6.5. Sport Areas

5 January 2015, 19:20 p.m.

When it is Big Break time, from 9:50 a.m. to 10:20 a.m., this space seems quite crowded, holding 10 classes of Year 9, about 600 young people exercising for their coming Physical Education (PE) test for high school entrance. I respect the PE teacher’s resourcefulness for effectively deploying this limited space. Half of the students are arranged to run while the other half is practising rope skipping on the basketball court (see Figure 6).
Figure 6: Young people arranged to run in a Conga format during Physical Education class.

Students are practising rope-skipping, keeping a safe distance from each other. Occasionally some find their way from the First TB through this area to the toilet area in the first floor of the Third TB.
The main sports area is outside the campus, which used to be totally independent, lying opposite the school gate on the other side of Spruce Road. Now it has been connected by a two-metre-wide overhead bridge to the corridor of the First TB. It is iron, painted in dark red. It was built for security reasons, as the students had to cross the road to have Physical Education (PE) lessons. But it is more for management, commented a PE teacher, because once the students got out the school gate, it became difficult to predict where they would go; some would always skip the PE lessons, and those are usually the trouble-makers.

One and half years ago, the running track was made of cinder. Now it is plastic track. Though newly built, it has become broken in several places. To save on costs, the school built a 300-metre track—while a normal track would be 400 metres. Normally the field within a 400-metre track can be used for football, but not this one. People are not allowed to play football here in order to protect the grass in the field lawn; I heard this from the PE teachers. But as no one is taking care of the lawn, parts of the lawn are bare while some places are dense with long grass.

During the Big Break, between 9:50 a.m. to 10:20 a.m., especially during the two weeks when the school is preparing for the National Inspection of Balanced Education, I see some of the school leaders running on the track, supervising Year 12s who are exercising for gaokao physical test. Deputy Principal Lin runs in his suit and leather shoes and Han (the female of the two) in her beautiful dress and leather sport shoes.

An indoor stadium is being built here at one end of the sports area, and most schools in M City have an indoor stadium. Understandably, the air for PE lessons is usually full of dust from the construction site, which is only 20 metres away from the running track. For the last two periods of classes in the morning and most class time in the afternoon, the track gets crowded, holding as many as six classes at most for PE lessons. Most of the PE teachers look intimidating, with a dark look. I was afraid of my PE teachers when I was a student, and now one of the PE teachers explains that to manage a class of 50 or 60 young boys and girls in an open but a bit crowded space, one has to be tough to keep them disciplined.
6.6. Library

I had planned to stop my work in the field because the semester has come to an end. The students are due to have their final examination the next Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and the teachers will go to other schools to mark the test papers because the final term test covers all local schools of the same level. I almost forgot the school library. People in this school very rarely come and read, given a very tight teaching and learning schedule. I had been advised that there was no need to have a look at the library because, like the Science Building, it is beautifully built and admired as a decoration, but is not used very often.

Miss Huang, with whom I walked home the previous day, is a teacher under the age of thirty. She is going to the reading room, and I happily join her. On our way from the Teachers’ Office to the library, she casually shares:

*I heard the librarians are people with background, or having strong guanxi with the government officialdom. Not all can get that position. Being a librarian has been the dream of many others; a position holds no pressure at all. You must have been familiar with this.*

The library is at the left-hand end of the second floor in Maofeng Building, which actually is the left wing of the Third TB. Maofeng is the name of a local corporate entity and the building was named after the corporation because of a fund donated by it. It is the newest in-campus building and has been in service since 2012. When moving close to the library, I see three steel burglar-proof doors, each with a steel doorplate nailed above. The one in the middle reads “Reading Room”, and the other two “Library”.

The doors are still locked when it is 8:40 a.m., with a notice on the reading room’s door saying that the opening hours start from 8:00 a.m. from Monday to Friday. Huang shows no surprise at this, and neither do I. When chatting, she mentions that there are two librarians working here, one with bianzhi (see footnote 4 in page 67) and one without. Huang now suddenly seems very prudent, avoiding a sensitive topic such as a person’s social background.

*You know what does it mean, right?*

Yes, I do.

In front of the library is a space as big as approximately three badminton courts, in the middle of which stands the flag tower for the flag-raising ceremony. It is then that we notice a female
student sitting there with her face buried in her hand on her knees. She is in her school uniform and we know it is a girl because of her neck long hairstyle and the way she sits. Then we hear her loud cry. While we are hesitating and wondering what to do to help, one of the librarians arrives. Huang goes up to greet her and I go to introduce myself. She seems very confused about my identity but she doesn’t ask any questions after Huang hints that I have come here teaching for one month. She might have no time to check on me, as she starts clearing. Um, this must be the one without bianzhi, I think to myself.

The librarian also notices the crying girl and asks Huang if they should call someone to help. But who shall we call? They hesitate. While they are exchanging ideas, I go to the girl, feeling uneasy if we leave her like that. I sit near her and ask what has happened and who she is. She must have sensed someone beside her and she stops crying. But she refuses to show her face. Huang comes near too. After some effortless soothing talk, Huang takes me aside, suggesting that it might be better to leave her alone as she refuses to talk. I agree.

I first go to the library and to the reading room and immediately find myself having a problem with the air inside. It smells mouldy, although everything looks new. Two windows are in the wall opposite the door, all perfectly covered with heavy curtains. The curtains are of good quality, making the room dim. A wood-coloured office desk stands at the door, with a computer screen on it. A piece of white A4 paper on the back of the screen reads: “out of order”. Behind this office desk stand another four student desks and chairs. There is no desk, as the national inspection for the Evaluation of Balanced Education has just finished, I assume. Twelve two-metre high shelves of books stand in rows, leaving a half-metre space in-between and a one-metre wide aisle (see Figure 8). A piece of A3 paper on the side of the shelves shows the book subjects; all are subjects for the high school course. This library must serve as an academic reference resource. I do not want to stay to check to see how orderly or not the books are arranged; the smell is not welcoming and I have no interest. People do not visit here.
The reading room (see Figure 9) is nicer—spacious, bright and well aired. Two big glass windows are in the wall with two steel burglar-proof doors, with the same type burglar-proof window bars. The curtain is thin and in maple yellow. The part above one metre high, on the opposite wall, is all glass. I love that. These two walls are lined with magazines. In the middle are placed four wide wooden tables, with about 20 wooden arm chairs around them. Huang has been sitting in the second chair from the left, a magazine in front of her. She is not reading; maybe she is thinking about her coming class. I sit next to her, taking a nearby magazine: *Exploration and Discussion*. Huang starts a conversation: her family, some anecdotes of her friends and her teaching. When it comes to her teaching, her tone becomes serious, different from the cosy one when talking about her contented and easy life. She is thinking about how much of what she teaches in the class can be useful for her students. I do not know. “*People might learn most from their colleges or site work?*” I try to comment. This seems an interesting topic, but it is time for her to leave for the class.
I stay reading the magazine while wondering who might be coming. During the long break after the second class, one girl student comes and picks up a newspaper for about one minute and leaves. Two essays from my magazine catch my eye: one is on Knowledge and the other on Methodology. It is a delight that now I can understand most of the concepts in the essays, but another disappointment that, again, they are a kind of repetition of a translation of Western scholars. No Chinese amongst the references.

My neck pain prompts me to leave. It is 11:20 a.m. I should not have expected people to come. During the opening hours, the students are expected to sit in the class or rest in the dormitory, or work on their homework. The teachers are occupied too.
Chapter Seven: Life in Classroom 6, Year 10

In China, Year 10 is the first year of a three-year period that students spend at high school. In Year 10 in M School, the first two classes are thought of as the “good” ones, where lies the hope of the school leader for a higher admission rate to college. Forty-four boys and girls of around 17 years of age are in Classroom 6 (C6) Year 10. They are described as the ‘babies’ or ‘stars’ by Mr Yu, the head teacher, when talking about class management, but as ‘rubbish’ when it comes to the test paper score.

C6, it turns out, ranked last in the English test in the mid-term examination, with an average score of 46 out of 150. The policy for university admission in this province in China was issued in May 2015, as a move towards educational reform: to enter the first rank of universities requires a score above 130 in the English test; to rank in the second layer requires a score above 110 and the third layer above 90, and the last rank above 80. I see only a slim opportunity for the C6 group to go to university.

The location of C6 Year 10 is on the fourth floor of the Third TB, a typical teaching building, five storeys high. “Typical”, here, means of brick and concrete, designed specifically for identical classrooms, and it is not necessary that it be colourful, aesthetic or comfortable. Like most urban classrooms, C6 is rectangular, with floor tiles in light melon, white walls decorated with one national flag, slogans, blackboards, and the platform equipped with multimedia facilities. Of course, there are desks and chairs, a standing cupboard for storage of cleaning tools, ceiling fans, doors and windows.

The national flag is placed in the middle right, above the whiteboard and in the front wall facing all the chairs and desks. At its two sides stand two pieces of light yellow honorary credentials on paper which is not very thick, telling the visitor about class achievements in disciplinary behaviour. The whiteboard is approximately two and a half metres wide and one and half a metre in height, positioned on the wall just over one metre from the ground. At its side, which is close to the door, are the schooling timetable, the class schedule, a name list, a notice calling for donations from the students for a peer with cancer, and a notice for money needed for a class uniform. At its other side is a mobile whiteboard, functioning as the screen for the projector in the ceiling. The platform is one step higher off the ground, its length, strangely, unable to cover the two whiteboards. This is where the teacher stays during most of the class time. The teacher’s table on the platform is, in fact, a multimedia operating station,
on which several whiteboard pens are handy. Its surface tells one it is cleaned, probably daily, but not very carefully, using a soft duster. The multimedia is mainly for presenting the mute Power Points and has no access to internet.

The chairs and desks stand in pairs, four pairs in a row, with six rows altogether, with two pairs in the last row. The distance between the platform and the first row of the students’ desks is usually very narrow; so much so that one can only move through sideways. One morning, Mr Yu asks for certain space in that area; people move their desks backward a bit but the space has shrunk back to its normal size by the afternoon. All the desks look rather crowded with all kinds of text and exercise books, leaving no room for a schoolbag and water bottle. Not all use schoolbags. Five or six schoolbags hang at the back of the chairs behind their owners, and several cloth bags are hung at one side of the desks. Only half the class prepare a bottle of water for the whole day, and the bottle stays beside one of the desk legs. The other half may not drink any water during the several hours in the classroom, because there is no drinking water supplied on campus.

Looking up, one finds in the ceiling six fluorescent tubes in three rows, ensuring adequate lighting for the evening classes. Also, four old-style fans, now, in winter, covered in dust as well as rust. The fans, in my mind, suggest an image of the summer classroom in sultriness and stuffiness, given the local climate. This also reminds people that this school is financed by the town government, because a nearby secondary school under city government has air conditioners in both classrooms and dorm room.

In the middle of the back wall is a blackboard approximately one metre wide and four metres in height, one metre from the floor (see Figure 10). It is said to be a space for building class culture. It is always empty when I am present in the classroom. At its two sides are two squares (of one metre in size) in bright yellow foam paper—or presentations, I guess. In the square near the corner are several coloured pictures of class members who have either done well or achieved good progress in the last examination. In the other square, near the door, are four A3-sized documents, mostly the test paper answers. Among others, the form displaying quantified Morality and Conduct of C6 students stands out. A round white quartz clock is positioned above the board, in the middle of a line of four pairs of slogans—eight Chinese characters cut out of bright red plastic paper: 团结 (unification), 诚信 (integrity), 礼貌 (politeness) and 进取 (progression).
The windows of the classroom are thin, steel-framed sliding windows, one metre in width and two metres in height, densely barred. There are four on each side wall. The curtains are not of a high quality, but the light blue colour is a good match for the school uniform. All the window frames and the two doors are metal and all are barred. This may suggest an image of prison or “encagement” to some Western eyes, but I do not feel that way. We may take the metal and densely barred style as being “modern” and exhibiting “safety” in China.

Figure 10. Classroom 6, Year 10, facing the back wall.

**Episode 1. Military Training and Class Committee in C6**

The information following is from a casual talk with Mr Yu. Mr Yu has just turned fifty, and he has more than thirty years of teaching experience. He seems proud of being successful as a head teacher, and I invite him to talk about his secret.

*A successful head teacher demands skills, and the most important one is to manage the students. Managing students can be tricky, but it can be easy once you know the tricks. The top secret to me is whether you can pick the right people and make a strong class committee group.*

“How you do this?”
To start high school, young people are supposed to have at least 10 days’ school military training in early September. It is mostly about the collective sense of honour and discipline, but also an opportunity where people can know about each other. For me this is where I can get an impression of what kind of people I am going to manage and how to do that. This requires sharp observation of course. It is not difficult to pick up the signals as they usually all want to be acknowledged by others. Some will work hard to show that s/he is better than others, or more willing to assume responsibilities. They are judging you too, looking for your concern towards them; they care a lot about what the head teacher is doing when they are trained under the scorching sun. So I insist staying together with them, sunny and rainy, assuring them that their head teacher is reliable and willing to stand beside them supporting.

“Any fixed rules for class committee members?”

We have rules, say we must have class committee group, but the operating space for the head teacher is large: I can decide whom to be chosen and how many. In my class, I have named 33 out of the 44 as members of the class committee.

“What? Really? (He laughs at my surprised face.) Can you be specific?”

Ok. Usually there are five top class cadres: the Monitor, The Classroom Communist Youth League Secretary, the Vice Monitors, and Commissary in charge of Discipline, of Learning. But you can add more vice monitors and in my class I have three. I can also name people as the monitor of Entertainment, of Learning, of Organisational Work, of Publicity, of Chinese study, of English study, of Maths study, of Physics study, of Chemistry study, of History study, of Politics and Economics study, of Geography study, of PE study, Of Behaviour Manners…. By having 33 out of 44 as classroom leaders in C 6, the rest, 11, are well supervised. (He grins.) Managing class can be easy in that way.

“And your criteria for selecting?”

If I notice, say, someone in the class breaks the class rules very often, I will name him or her a Commissary in charge of that classroom rule. More specifically, if I find out, or other colleagues tell me that Liu talks a lot when the teacher is talking in class, I can name Liu a Commissary in charge of Discipline. If he talks in Chinese class in particular, he can become in charge of the discipline of Chinese classroom. Everyone
has a sense of honour of being a classroom leader and is willing to assume the responsibility accordingly.

“Smart. I heard people can elect the class leader?”

Of course they can.

“What if what the class elect is not what you consider ideal?”

Of course they can if I agree, I mean. Again, you need to be observant to the ethos popular in the class. People at this age can be rebellious and some may prefer to be eye-catching through despising the teacher’s advice; and if this boy or girl is also good at convincing people, the chance exists that s/he be elected. But we say that coming events cast their shadows before, if you notice that you need to nip that in the bud, or you invite trouble. I will just name the leader group. The students are not stupid, they are good at reading the message, they grow too and they will understand the good intention behind this.

**Episode 2. The First Meeting with C6, Year 10**

Monday, 15 December 2014

Having gained access, I make my request to Mr Yu, the head teacher of C6, Year 10, to arrange my meeting with the students. Both Han and Yu suggest that I meet with Lin before I go to the classroom, because he is officially in charge of this section of senior middle school. Yu advises that I meet with Deputy Principal Lin at 8:10 a.m. on Monday, and then he arranges a time for me to go to the classroom.

To look younger, I choose to wear a light plum-purple jacket and black jeans to meet the young people of Year 10. I go to Han’s office at around 8:10 a.m. to see Lin. Lin and Han share the same office. After chatting for about ten minutes, a boy and a girl suddenly appear at the door asking who Ren Yanming is and claim that Mr Yu has sent them for her. This is a bit unexpected as I am hoping to get more information from the principals, but it is better that I follow Yu’s arrangement. The two principals understand my situation well and I leave, following the two young people.

It is about a five-minute fast walk from the Principal’s office on the third floor in the administrative building to the classroom on the fourth floor of the Third Teaching Building. There are no lifts on campus, nor any special devices for those with special needs. We see
four people smoking and playing poker in a room on the ground floor of the administrative building; the sign on the top of the door says Room of PE Teaching and Researching. Although I am not unprepared to meet the class, being called as such has been a bit unexpected and so on our way to the classroom I talk with the boy and girl, Tianqi and Xiaomei, about the situation in the class.

I ask, “What is going on in the class?”

Tianqi, the young boy, answers:

*Mr Yu tells us that a beautiful female PhD is coming to see our class, so we cannot wait to meet her. So all are waiting for you in the classroom.*

Xiaomei adds:

*Mr Yu tells that you are a very beautiful woman, and a doctor. So our classmates strongly request to see you immediately so that Mr Yu has to send us for you.*

Internally, I cringe at the title of “beauty” and “woman PhD” and give a small mirthless smile and murmur: “What if the class feel bamboozled by Mr Yu—there is no beautiful woman?”

I am a bit out of breath after walking fast and climbing up to the fourth floor, and Mr Yu, waiting at the steps, comes up:

*Take a breath. Why so long?*

“I took your advice and went to meet Lin; we had just started some casual talk”, I reply.

*Out of courtesy, you need to go and see Lin; otherwise we might have some trouble.*

“Of course. Han is there too.”

*I mainly want to save you from that situation (of meeting the superiors).*

“It’s ok. Mr Zeng, the Dean of the Teaching Affairs, and a Union Chairman Zeng, are there too.”

*Ah, the Chairman of the Worker’s Union. Used to be the Director of the General Affairs here, but quit two years ago and was promoted to this null position.*

“I heard the Dean is more powerful and lucrative than the Union Chairman?”

*Of course. Everyone knows that.*
He smiles knowingly and we are now at the door of the class. We enter, and unexpectedly he provokes:

Did I lie! How is this!

People start applauding, spiritedly and loudly. For a moment, I am at a loss. Quickly resuming calmness, I briefly introduce myself: my name and my educational and working experience, and then I state frankly why I am here. “I started a PhD programme in educational research and I am here to work on my homework. This PhD course will last at least three years; we spend the first year focusing on a research proposal, the second year on fieldwork/data collection, and the third year is spent writing the thesis. So if anyone of you is interested in doing a PhD course later, just come to me and you can get a consultant for free.”

A burst of laughter follows. Then a voice asks for my contact information.

This reminds me of my obligation of informing them of my research: “I will come tomorrow and issue each of you one of my name cards so you will have my email box, phone number, QQ number and Wechat account. Contact me as you wish. Can I do this, Mr Yu? (Of course, our honour, Yu nods.) With Mr Yu here, I need to get permission as he is my supervisor now.”

With Mr Yu here, I need to get permission, as he is my fieldwork supervisor. I briefly introduce the concept of data for my research and turn to Mr Yu again: “Do you think it sounds ok to give a brief introduction to my research here?”

I believe it is important and proper to maintain his authority in this context. Yu asks me to repeat what I have said in English. I follow his advice and speak slowly in English, so that I am well understood. Then I ask him for the next move. He comments, now using some English words occasionally:

The vocabulary in Miss Ren’s speech is quite large. It is a good chance for us to follow, isn’t it? Especially the way how she, a PhD candidate, learns and uses English. Her learning method. Most importantly, in my eyes, how to use it (after you learn the language). Listening, speaking and writing are the best way to improve our English. If you keep silent in our class, even if you have learned English for twenty years, you still cannot talk.

When he finishes, I encourage people to ask more questions. I want to hear more from the students before they get managed and guided by the head teacher.
Do you know other languages besides English? A boy’s voice.

What is your hobby? A girl’s voice.

“As for foreign languages, I know only a little about Russia.” I talk slowly in English and Yu translates ‘Russia’ into Chinese. “As for personal interests, I have watched a lot of cartoons and animations. Japanese animation, both movies and episodes, are my favourite; the latest one being Hunter x Hunter.” The class starts bubbling when they hear the name of a popular animation product. I know they understand my talk, so I continue; being frank is what I am good at, so I start observing while talking. “Korean TV is also a good way of killing time, say, Secret Garden. But I have kicked that habit as I need to be very focused on my current homework.” (Some giggles follow, repeating my words “kick” and “homework”.)

“Occasionally I can learn one or two simple sentences in Japanese or Korean, but they will be gone once the games end. Use it or forget it; that is, in my understanding, exactly how language works. Any other questions?”

Is that Jilin University where you used to work in M City? From a girl.

“Yes, you are right. The one near the airport, I think it is well known in M City.”

You didn’t mention this in your Chinese introduction. A boy challenges.

“Didn’t I? Sorry about that and thank you.”

She did say, but you have missed that information. A girl argues, obviously disgruntled.

How old are you? From a girl.

Some chuckle, and Yu immediately stops them, his face a bit dark, raising his voice reminding them of their manner:

You are English learners and you should remind yourself of the English manners.

How can you ask a female about her age? You really should not...

I interrupt him, worrying that his concerns might extinguish the students’ curiosity. I prefer to see young people asking what they are genuinely interested. So I promptly answer that question: “Though I am an English learner, I am still Chinese; so I am all good with this question. I was born in 1974.” Several students start counting their fingers and murmuring 84, 94, 04…
“I know in China we have the discrimination against women with some age. There is a joke about this, which is quite popular: the customers’ eyes could be caught immediately at the names of two dishes on the menu in food stores: 40-year-old women and 40-year-old men. This is of course to arouse the customers’ curiosity and encourage consumption. And the dish would be soybean residue and flower heart radish (a burst of deep loud hearty laughter), which in Chinese culture can imply that at forty, man blooms and can become a Casanova, while women fade and become waste. But (I pause for seconds until all are attentive), I am one with full self-respect, and I am still seeing myself as a swan, not a goose at this age (students laugh and applaud). Thanks. Age is not a big problem to me.”

Students start asking their own questions and none of them are about English learning. I have noticed that two or three show indifference, several others are judging, and one or two seem ready to challenge, but most are curious and focused. Students are sitting in four rows in pairs and in five or six lines in good order. There are A4-sized textbooks piled high on top of each school desk, higher than the height of the person sitting behind. Several students have water bottles standing beside because the space on desk is scant.

Yu seems uneasy, as the questions sound irrelevant to study; he advises me to talk about my experience of learning English in Chinese and then translating into English. But I feel it is more relevant to follow the flow of the young people’s thinking. We talk and laugh, and Mr Yu maintains a smile until the moment when a boy asks (for my convenience, I name him Gutty):

_Have you got a boyfriend?_

Several laugh with coarse, hearty guffaw, while several condemn in a reproachful tone, being solicitous towards me, and many are chuckling. I grin at this, while Yu’s face gets completely dark, and he reprimands, glaring with burning and reproachful eyes:

_Who said that?! So filthy and unacceptable! This also reflects the dark and abominable side in your inner world._

He sounds very protective towards me, which I well understand. I try hard not to laugh too much, thinking how to diffuse the situation. Being frank seems the best strategy and I talk about my family. The bell rings, and we finish.

Back at the office, I take out my notebook and write down what stays in my mind of the recent meeting with what I thought was C6. Mr Yu informs me that I will go with him in five
minutes and meet another class of his—his own class—C6. It turns out that the one I just visited was Class 5.

The meeting with C6 is well managed and guided by Yu, and, therefore, imbued with questions from selected students on how to learn English well.

**Episode 3. The Piles of Books**

There are three aspects of local context that are important to understand before a discussion around the piles of books: in a Chinese high school, all the students stay in the home classroom while teachers rotate; the students are required to learn the same subjects in high school and there are seldom elected courses; and for each subject, each student has at least one textbook and its matching exercise book.

Twelve subjects are run for Year 10 at M School: Chinese, English, Maths, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, History, Politics, Geography, Music, Drawing and Physical Education. Music and Drawing classes tend to become unimportant for Year 12. In taking a close look at the pile of books, I see textbooks: excluding Music, Drawing and Physical Education, for the main subjects, each student in C6 has nine textbooks plus nine matching exercise books, and almost always another nine test paper books. Very occasionally there are one or two 青年文摘 /Youth Literary Digests, a periodical under the supervision of Central Communist Youth League. Occasionally, other books can be seen hidden inside the desk drawer.

Some have raised the issue of unwanted waste in relation to this tradition, of natural resources, say timber; of finance, as people have to pay for the textbooks; and of labour, as people have to work on recycling them after those books are sold to recycling stations. The waste might double or triple if there is more than one child in the family. More than a decade has passed; people see no change and the voices for reform in this respect have faded too.

**Episode 4. Twenty-four-hour Surveillance Classroom**

The morning reading section starts from 7:20 a.m. For morning reading, the teachers, and the head teachers in particular, must arrive earlier to catch the late-comers. But they do not need to now: classroom life has been under 24-hour surveillance. All the classrooms were equipped with a spherical camera two years ago. The aim is, Mr Yu says, to prevent cheating in one of the national examinations. Now, with the help of the surveillance devices, he can watch from his computer in his office to see what was or is going on in the classroom.
Yu doesn’t seem to have any problem with this surveillance, which was not my expectation.

“Do we, I mean all the teaching staff, agree to have this surveillance device?” I mean to raise the problem of violated privacy, but I remind myself that this may be my assumption.

_Do we have options?

Yu gives an expression, hinting that my question sounds alien. With a slight laugh, showing his tolerance of me, he continues:

_First of all, the decision-makers don’t need to consult us and ask for the teaching staff’s opinion; besides, why wouldn’t we agree? We benefit from this kind of surveillance. This makes class management a bit easy as you can always know what is going on in the classroom. And you know what, I, most of us actually, think this can also be a protecting device for us teachers._

“How?” I am confused. He tells of an event where a secondary school teacher did commit suicide, probably due to a false accusation after physically punishing one of the boys, and he comments:

_What really happened, by the teacher’s word, was that the boy came up to him and punched him first, and he didn’t know why; but no one caught that, and when he fought back, several saw him beating that boy. This was of course fomented by the impartial report in social media and he experienced enormous pressures and chose to die, jumping into Huangpu River in Guangzhou. Later it was said that he was going through some pressure of his graduation from his master’s programme._

“Which means he committed suicide, also, probably out of the academic pressure?” I try to analyse.

_Exactly. But have you heard anyone who fails their master’s programme nowadays?_

He doesn’t want to go with this and comes back to the surveillance topic.

_He is only 32 years old. So back in our office we agree that if there is some surveillance equipment there, probably the teacher can get his innocence back._

I have to agree with him on that—thinking further on what kind of career has teaching become in China.
Episode 5. Hide and Seek on Winter Solstice

Winter Solstice falls on 22nd December in 2014. On that date I am in C6.

For the Southern Chinese, a family reunion is essential for this traditional festival, but this tradition seems to be dying out. I have not been aware of the date until two girls from the class come during a break in the afternoon and ask whether I have prepared dumplings or sweet dumplings. In this very short and casual conversation they share with me their view of this holiday: a holiday unwelcome to them because of the interruption to schooling.

The problem is this: to have morning reading and night classes (self-directed learning), all students from Year 10 and above in M City must stay in the campus dormitory from Sunday evening to Friday evening. But not all go home at weekly intervals. Several choose to go monthly, or bimonthly, for different reasons: home is too far away; there are no people at home; time back home can be too boring or intimidating. Some students, therefore, upon application from their parents and permission being granted by the head teachers, are allowed to stay in the dorm on weekends, but not all holidays.

On the Winter Solstice, all the students are required to leave for home after 5:40 p.m. and both the campus and the dorm area are officially closed. But they must return for the regular morning reading session the next day. For those several who have to take a bus trip of one or more hours to get back home, this kind of holiday is nothing more than a hassle, given that they have to get up the next morning at around 5:30. Some choose to stay at a classmate’s home that is not that far away, but some choose to play a game—they stay in the dorm, hiding in the toilet when the dorm staff do the checking, and they stay in darkness in the dorm room for the whole night. But this year they seem to have trouble playing this game because the dorm staff people are experienced too.

When asked about this, several teachers also felt sympathetic towards those who cannot enjoy the holiday, but they can do nothing. Besides, they agree that the students in M City have already been lucky in that they can at least have weekends; high school students in the Chinese inland area can have only one half day’s free time monthly.

Episode 6. Morning Reading

The morning reading lasts for half an hour, from 7:20 a.m. to 7:50 a.m.

The quality of the teaching and teachers in China is judged by the test scores of his/her class. With this, all teachers, understandably, hope the young people will input more time into their
subject. Hence, for a fair distribution of morning time, there is a type of duty-roster arrangement: Monday morning is for Chinese reading, Tuesday for English, Wednesday for History/Politics/Geography, Thursday for Maths/Physics/Chemistry/Biology and Friday for Chinese/English.

In C6, thanks to an experienced head teacher and a class committee which he organised, all looks well managed and in good order. For the morning reading section, two class monitors, a Vice Monitor and a Commissary, take the lead. Ling is the Vice Monitor, a short, slim young girl with shining dense hair, cut in student style. She takes her responsibility sincerely and seriously, and she sometimes chivvies the class, reprimanding by smashing her palm against the teacher’s desk—with a demeanour that looks too severe in my eyes. Possibly believing she is nurturing out of concern for class progress, she seems fearless when rebuking some tallboys—they are so tall that she only reaches just above their elbows. After Ling, one of the commissaries stands up and tells the class to take out the textbook and turn to certain page and read after her. Some read carefully, some read in a daze, some murmur, some close their eyes, some engage in copying answers to finish their homework, some talk to each other without looking at each other.

**Episode 7. Breaks**

Most of the breaks during the day last ten minutes except for the Big Break—the one between the second and the third class, which lasts 30 minutes. During the break, one or two in C6 choose to take the remnants of breakfast out of the classroom and find a place to finish their breakfast. For the sake of food smells, it is advised not to take food into the classroom. One or two other boys leave their seats and go outside to the corridor and stand for a while. Some leave their seats for another’s place in order to chat and laugh. One or two come to the right-hand corner at the back of classroom where two guitars, one dark red and one a wood colour, stand against the wall. The boys are new to guitar and are trying to learn it by themselves. Some choose to have a catnap at their desks. Most stay at their desks (see Figure 11). The occasional sound of guitar and some chattering suddenly livens the classroom, a bit different from what I had previously observed: the head teacher, upon seeing students hanging out during break, would tease a bit about forgetting how fierce the competition is for the upcoming gaokao. Probably this scenario only happens with the selected good classes, or gaokao still possibly seems distant to C6.
Figure 11. C 6 during break.

The class period lasts 45 minutes and the first one starts at 8 a.m. and continues until 12 p.m., with breaks varying from 10 to 30 minutes. At 12 p.m. the students go for lunch and can have one hour for rest time. Afternoon classes start at 2 p.m. and end at 5:35 p.m. The last class is one without teaching but not unsupervised, and on Mondays this is used for a class meeting supervised by the head teacher. The evening study classes begin from 7:20 p.m. After dinner, the students can have an hour or so of spare time where they can take a shower in the shower house that is locked at other times of the day. The school finishes by 9:40 p.m. or so, and they must be in bed, lights off, by 10:30 p.m.

**Episode 8. Class Time**

Though still controversial, the multimedia devices in classroom teaching are used regularly. But the multimedia does not seem very “multi”: only the mute PowerPoints are shown, no video clips, no songs, no internet access. This is probably just an alternative way to present the textbook. Teaching, therefore, becomes a matter of following what is readily produced in the PowerPoint, every detail in teaching is fixed, leaving little space for the teacher’s autonomy. I see myself in all the teachers here: trying their best to offer more to the young people and working hard trying to accomplish what is stipulated by a national curriculum. They have to teach to the test, and the test is everything.
In the world of the students, however beautiful and informative the PowerPoint looks, some think it boring, because they are just repeating the textbook; some think it esoteric, because they cannot understand; some think the PowerPoint and the teaching may both be good but they are just too sleepy; some may think the teaching may be good but not as good as the latest Korean soap opera, or hilarious cartoons, or an absorbing novel. Those individual students, sitting still, live in their own worlds: some are gazing at the book in front of them while too absorbed into their own worries, some are looking at the PowerPoint without blinking, some are working hard to keep their eyes open, and some are trying their best to follow the teacher. One or two fail to keep their eyes open and have to bend down on their desk to have several minutes’ rest; one or two cannot control themselves and read novels or even watch a TV series from the mp4 hidden under a pile of messy books, thinking they are more clever than the teacher. While the teachers have been very kind when I am sitting at the back of the classroom, when they have wanted to bring an individual student’s attention back to the class, they will go near to that student and raise their voice a bit.

Occasionally, Min, the female class Monitor, answers “yes” or “no” to the teacher and some of the classmates ask her to shut up. During a break, I leave my seat and go to Kai, a boy and friend to Min, but who asks her to shut up in the class. I try to have a conversation with him and ask why he dislikes Min replying to the teacher’s question.

*She doesn’t know what she is talking about and she doesn’t seem to know what the teacher is talking about either. You can ask her about that. And we find her answering most of the time interrupting the teacher’s talking.*

There is no hesitation when he speaks.

When the opportunity arises, I invite Min for her defence.

“I notice that you are the only one answering questions in class. Why?”

*Miss, I am not sure how long you can stay here with us. But with you sitting in the back, our teachers have become nicer. Less dirty words. I don’t want to talk evil of our teacher, but the class time has been so boring and I don’t think our class has a good ethos of learning. I raise my voice, for one thing, to keep my thinking on track with the teacher’s talking, and for another, I also want to cheer others up, those who are falling asleep. Kai is right that I sometimes don’t understand well the teacher’s talking. But their talk is there in the textbook and sometimes verbatim. Of course, I*
myself am the main problem. I don’t know what is happening to me these days, I just
cannot follow and I am experiencing a hard time catching up with others. I think I am
trying my best. There are so many daily chores being a Monitor. I would like to have
28 hours a day. I don’t have a strong academic foundation, by the way, and that
probably is the main reason why I am feeling high school life is strenuous for me.
(Her smile fades.)

**Episode 9. Min and her Sport Ethos**

Min, the Monitor, is an 18-year-old female student. She has very thick hair, cut short. She is
one of the few girls who can be labelled as strong, with a well-developed figure. She is
friendly and always ready to help—and this is probably why she is popular in the class. Her
manner in class arouses my curiosity, and we have a casual talk before the evening classes
begin.

“Where did you spend your junior middle school life?” I start.

*Xiaolin.*

“Did you like that school?”

*Better than this one.* (She laughs lightly, as if thinking of some of the delightful
moments.)

“Why?”

*I am a sportsperson and I used to attend almost all those competitions and I
compete against people from this school.* (She stutters a bit, hesitating whether she
should tell). *Something happened, which we, sports lovers cannot appreciate.*

“Sports lovers don’t like this school?”

*Not only sports lover, neither those members of school singing or dancing teams do.*

“Are you telling me that people don’t like this school because they were defeated by it?”

*Not that we lost.* (She suddenly speeds her talk.) *It was that coach here taught his
people to win in an indecent way. Their strategy, I mean, it is kind of fishy to be
exact.*

“When did you start practising sport?”
From Year four.

“Enjoy it?”

Very much.

“But I heard from Mr Zeng, your PE teacher that you are unwilling to keep going with sports? And he feels sorry about this.”

It is that I am unwilling to keep practising here in this school. I am just reluctant to compete in the name of this school. If I compete for this school and I may play against my previous team members; I don’t want that.

“Is it a loss that you have stopped? Your PE teacher takes you as a sports talent.”

My family are not supportive of me doing that. Or I might have gone to the PE school. I was chosen by coaches in games of weight-lifting, Judo and long jumping.

“Which they don’t support?”

That cannot be a career, only works for young people. (Pause) Useless.

“And you agree?”

I had a plan to try for a week the sport school, but they didn’t allow me. And sports cannot last, and it is so arduous and tiring. Get up so early, almost every day, for a long run regardless of the weather...

“But you said you enjoy it a lot?”

I enjoy doing it with those team mates. The friendship makes all worthwhile. All my good friends are those with whom I used to play football and practise track and field sports.

“It sounds as if this school is not for you a good choice, simply because of the indecent strategy the coach from this school employed in the sports match?”

I was almost destroyed in the game. One of our main players in girls’ football got severely wounded in her waist. They (the rival team) said that that was their coach’s idea, to hurt others ankle or bump into other’s waist. We are so repellent against those ideas. Our coach had taught us that it was best that we get informed of those strategies, but not go for them. We should play and compete decently and
honestly, not sneakily and shadily. I appreciate that. Some of my teammates got injured and I had the experience of having a football passing my face very narrowly and people told me that the competitor targeted her foot on my face. That’s how this school’s sports team play. One of my previous teammate had this experience that she felt embarrassed competing by this school’s name and she felt guilty towards us.

**Episode 10. Physical Education**

The PE class is conducted in the sports area, outside the main campus, on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. During my stay on campus, I have heard several voicing concerns about PE. First, the newly built plastic track is of poor quality; it smells and it is broken after only half a year’s use. Second, the supplies people get for PE class from the local government are not reliable: take the hurdles for instance, the hurdles break when the runner bumps into them. Third, PE teachers have not been fairly treated: to cultivate student athletes, the training requires them to get up early in the morning and come home late in the evening, but their work is usually ignored by people because PE is not valued in gaokao. Fourth, the area has been too limited: a 300-metre track and the irregular football field at times hold as many as ten classes. But the young people in C6 do not care about the condition, they run wholeheartedly, they make fun of each other, they learn carefully how to stop a football and pass it about—they enjoy this 45 minutes out of the classroom.

**Episode 11. Evening Classes**

The evening classes start at around 7:20 p.m. and last until 9:40 p.m.

I choose to arrive a bit early to see what the classroom is like. The grey steel-bar gate to the stairs in the third teaching building is open (I have no idea when it is locked). In the teaching building the lights are as bright as the daylight. The floor tiles of the steps and the classroom floor are pale pink in this light. I am a bit short of breath after climbing the stairs to the fourth floor. From the classroom door I first see a group of seven boys and girls, sitting around a desk at the back of the classroom, playing poker games, with a pair standing by and watching the game (see Figure 12). They have obviously gotten used to my being in the classroom as they do not look up at me. On the heads and foreheads of two boys are two or three white paper notes, which must denote that they are from the losers’ side. They are so absorbed in their game and talking and exchanging ideas in their play, which I fail to understand. I
pretend to ignore them and sit down at my desk, observing the class and thinking of how I will begin my first interview.

*Figure 12. A corner of C6, twenty minutes before the evening classes.*

When the bell rings, all have gone back to their seats except for some late-comers. No teaching is required but the class must be supervised by one of the teachers, and the students are expected to obey all the class rules. Usually two teachers are on duty for the evening classes and they are responsible for solving problems if any arise from the students. The teachers on duty are kind enough to leave me alone with C6 when they know that I might talk with some of the individual students. I have not seen any students in C6 raise any questions during my stay, as they are busy with a lot of homework. There is homework for at least six subjects every day, and the content of the homework is written on the whiteboard by the subject class monitor, who always kindly reminds the class to finish and hand in the exercise books.

When the evening classes finish, for ten minutes Spruce Road suddenly regains life. Walking between the school gate and the dorm gate among the army of school uniforms, I feel delighted to catch several pairs of boys and girls walking with their hands held together.

**Episode 12. Monday Class Meeting**

The eighth class during the day is usually for homework, except for on Mondays. The last class on Monday afternoon is for Class Meeting. It may not look like a meeting, if meeting
means discussion of a proposal. It is a time for the class members to present themselves with the help of PowerPoint, and the head teacher is supposed to be there for comments and summary. Due to time restraints, two students work as a team at the beginning, and then four. When presenting, all team members stand in front of the teacher’s table, staring at the computer screen, reading their share of the script from the PowerPoint. Some show enthusiasm, while some are disinterested in the presentation, as the presentation is made compulsory by the class rules, instead of being their own choice. They have done very well given the very restricted access to internet and computer resources. One of them even manages to upload a short video clip, which turns out to be the head teacher’s favourite theme—the Chinese family filial piety. Others choose to present on topics such as the importance of a civilised manner on campus, or politeness, or environmental protection. Mr Yu looks proud of the organisation of the class meeting and even offers me the PowerPoint he made for the first class meeting (refer The ‘Winners’ and ‘Losers’ in Chapter Ten).

When the head teacher is absent, or when the last class is supervised by a different teacher for homework, several boys choose to slip out for some basketball time.

**Episode 13. The Parents-Teacher Meeting**

31 December 2015

With the permission of Mr Yu, I attend the Parents-Teacher meeting

In M School, the Parents-Teacher meeting happens once a semester and usually in the week after the midterm examination. The tradition here is for the parents, for example all the parents of Year 10, to first of all sit in the school hall to be addressed by the school leader and then go and sit in the classroom to hear the teacher talk. Because I have been acquainted with some basic data of the parents from C6, I am not surprised to see some parents come in their working uniform, some in shabby shoes, and some in shoddy clothes, while one or two ‘boss-like’ fathers dress in very formal suits. Only half of the families in C6 have local hukou. The attendance, I hear from one of the head teachers, shows insufficient involvement of the parents.

Three school leaders take turns to talk about what the parents are expected to do for their children’s futures, the achievement the school has obtained and the gaokao policies. Most parents are reticent, and I observe very few social and diplomatic skills in them. Most listen
with a worried look and none raise any questions. Only two fathers give short greetings to the school leader when the meeting finishes.

Back in C6, I choose to sit at the back and the parents are guided to the seat of their child, and on the top of the desk several forms are awaiting them. They are Excel forms which have been painstakingly produced following each monthly examination, showing meticulous statistical data for each student: the total score, subject score, the increased/decreased points compared to the last exam score with respect to the total and each subject, the place of that score in the class and over the whole year, and how many places this score has progressed or declined in the class and over the whole year. This form, printed, will be assuredly delivered to all parties—the students, the parents, the teachers, the team leader in charge of the whole year—ensuring all parties are clear about the individual’s place. This seems to be the main task for Parents-Teacher meeting.

I need to be attentive, too, as Yu wants me to help write the meeting memo. By then I have been informed that there will be 26 attending. The meeting starts with a short video showing pictures of each student in C6 during school military training, and this is followed by the theme of the meeting: Let’s work together to escort our children to their futures. What follows is a lecture on how to read the forms on the table, and the names of the top five students are repeated. To effectively address the test paper scores, all levels of gaokao admission grades are presented as a parameter for the parents to envision a possible future for the student. This is when all the parents prudently examine all the figures in the forms, most sitting like the students—in silence. To further motivate the parents in managing the students, Yu presents the PowerPoint he used at the first class meeting: A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

With the PowerPoint over, Yu then invites the parents to receive suggestions and advice. One mother is cooperative enough and expresses the parents’ gratitude to the teachers. The meeting ends with two recommendations from Yu to the parents:

- Make a timetable for the student to help improve his/her learning efficiency back home after school.
- Ask the child to ask himself/herself two questions daily: Do I live my day seriously? Do I study today?
A short, slim female student enters and sits in her seat, with tears falling (there is more about her in the next chapter). I recall the group of students standing outside of the classroom, fidgeting while waiting for the coming decree from the parent.
Chapter Eight: Individual Student Cases

The accounts presented in this chapter are derived from interview data.

8.1. Jiao and her Left-Behind Experience

Jiao is the ‘short and slim’ female student, who enters the classroom in tears at the Parents-Teacher meeting. She has long hair and is wearing a light blue school uniform. She goes straight to her seat, sits down and stays motionless. But I see the tears falling down her face, silently. She is not crying as such, not even weeping—I mean that her face, even her eyes, remain expressionless—drops of tears fall down her cheeks and she doesn’t bother to wipe them. I stand up, go to her and bend down and ask, all out of a mother’s instinct, as gently as I can: “Are you ok?” She nods. “Can we talk and see if I can do anything to help?” I add. She bites her lower lip and the tears suddenly increase; I give her a light hug, something I believe any mother would do in this situation.

It is my test scores.

She murmurs, when I hold her in my arms. I feel relieved; just scores, I think to myself. “You didn’t do well in your last test? Well, it happens to every student, I guess?” I try to comfort her.

I can never do well enough, I have tried my best and I just cannot satisfy them.

“They?”

My parents.

Then the head teacher comes down from the front of the classroom and a woman, short, in bright red coat, approaches from outside almost at the same time. Later I find out that the woman is Jiao’s mother. Her image lingers, I mean the image of Jiao’s tears, which asks for more of my attention. I find her to be not a melancholy person: she laughs and sings. What is her world like?

20 January 2014

It is 7:40 p.m. I am in the corridor outside C6, Year 10, on the fourth floor. At 17 years of age, Jiao is only 150 cm in height. Having a round face, she looks slim, but her hair is thick and straight, reaching her waist. Most of the back of her loose school uniform jacket is wet, making it bluer than the other part, wet from her now dripping hair; today must be her washing day. I choose to stand facing her, with my mobile, pen and my notebook in hand, and she stands straight, her forearms loosely touching the railing, facing the darkness outside.
in the campus. I begin with asking about her homework: “Do you have a lot of homework today?”

All test papers.

“So the teachers have finished the teaching for the whole semester?”

Not yet. But almost.

“Can you finish all your homework in time?”

Sort of. (Her voice is now low with a bit hesitant.)

“What do you think is the most useful knowledge in your life after all these years of schooling?”

Don’t know. (No pause for thinking)

It is not working well, I think to myself. I stop asking her about schooling, I instead turn to ask about the pattern she chooses to draw on her school uniform, the left shoulder to be specific, in ballpoint pen. It is only the size of a fingernail, obviously a sun/circle surrounded by several stars/triangles. For a moment, she starts talking actively. I then get the opening to invite her to talk more about her life, her age and her hometown and when she started schooling.

Jiao was born in 1999 in the countryside in Hunan province. She went to primary school at the age of five, and she has an older sister and a younger brother. I ask whether people in her hometown generally disparage girls, which is not uncommon, to my knowledge.

My grandma treats me very well.

Her voice trembles a bit. I mean to wait, but I cannot stand the silence, and I start asking more about her sister. Her sister is older than her by two years and is now in Year 12. Jiao was raised by her grandparents, her mother’s parents, until she was 11 years old. During the first 11 years in her life she met her parents once a year, and our conversation brings us unavoidably to the topic of leaving her beloved grandmother. Her tears are now unstoppable and accompanied by violent sobs.

I hesitate, confused, and try to wait for about half a minute and she starts talking about the sudden death of her grandma in a traffic accident one and a half years ago. Twice she has to wait, while struggling to control her tears. This happens when she is recalling that it was her grandma who took good care of her from the first day she was born, and again when speaking

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5 The birth control policy in China has long allowed those living in the countryside to have two children under certain conditions—if the first child is a girl, for example. Besides, ethnic minorities (less than 10% of the population) are often allowed two or more. Another situation is those who are able to pay the fines of violating the one-child policy can have more children.
of the sudden loss. At the thought of the death of her grandma she looks so overwhelmed by sadness, and for the first time she has to dry her face with her sleeves.

Then her grandpa. The image of the grandpa appears to me to be that of a traditional Chinese peasant, who simply cannot stop working even if he does not need to. Jiao’s parents are willing to have the grandpa living with them in M City, but the grandpa insists on going out to look for a job. Aged and not in good health, he fails and then insists on going back to the countryside, probably unwilling to see himself as a burden to his daughter. Jiao starts sobbing at the thought of her grandpa living back in the countryside, alone. I understand her, as the image of the grandpa links to a reality revealed by several recent social research studies on the increasing wave of suicide by aged people in the Chinese countryside.

Then we talk about her parents and her relationship with them.

*We used to talk a lot. But stopped, especially after there were several arguments between us. I argued back.*

She used to share whatever happened in her life with the parents. She does not mention anything about the annual meeting with the parents, but I imagine it happens that the family reunion can be saturated with love and intimacy because it is only a yearly one. But not now, as whatever she shares, the parents claim “*authority and would like to lecture on my life and the peers seem to understand better*”. I then invite her to reflect more on how and why the relationship has deteriorated.

*At that time when I was not together with them, I was able to do well in schooling; I mean I can have good test scores. But they didn’t seem content, bugging me that what’s the use of good scores if a girl is not obedient enough. (She sobs.) Later my test scores are not as good as before and they start telling me that they see nothing good in me, or I am good for nothing.*

I pause, feeling depressed with empathy over her experience. I have to stop asking what might satisfy the parents, and change the topic to soothe her. When she calms down a bit, I ask about her parents and learn that they are now both working in factories; neither has achieved any higher education, so Jiao can get no help at home with her learning. I then

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6 Sociological research released in July, 2014 by Liu Yanwu, a lecturer at Wuhan University, showed that the suicide rate among the rural elderly in China has jumped from 100 per 100,000 to 500 per 100,000 in two decades. Liu Yanwu was in charge of the six-year study, which began in 2008. The research covers more than forty villages and eleven provinces in China. Liu concluded that suicide might be a way for the rural elderly to ease the pain of urbanisation; Xiao Shuiyuan, a professor at Central South University, believes that the suicide rate of Chinese senior citizens is triple the rate of other groups. For more information see Yan-wu, L. (2011). The Suicide Issue in the Countryside (1980-2009): Discussion with Professor Jing-jun [J].
assume that her sister might at least be able to help and find that the sister is still back in the hometown.

“When does your sister go back to the hometown?”

She never comes.

“Is she ok with that?” I actually feel shocked at knowing a child grows up seeing the parents yearly.

My sister is one who prefers to keep everything to herself. She might have complained in the past I guess? But not now.

“Your parents’ attitude?”

They must have tried to bring her over too. But failed. Too many conditions they cannot make it. So they have to leave her behind.

“Do you know anything specific regarding those conditions? Financial? Or hukou?”

I guess mainly out of the concern for her schooling, whether she is able to catch up in the local schooling here.

This reminds me of the local schooling policy and I ask: “Have you asked about the schooling policy here? I mean, will you have to go back for gaokao?”

No. I think I am now qualified to sit in gaokao here.

She sounds relieved a bit, or so I feel. Then we talk about her memories of the best thing and the worst thing. She shakes her head in silence when thinking about the best thing in her life, and she starts weeping at her memory of the worst.

It is what happened on the eve of the death of the grandma. (Sobbing.) She called but I was busy with my homework and I didn’t talk with her. (Sobbing.) I don’t want her to leave me.

“Grandma is better than mom?”

I was raised by grandma. Grandma feels closer than parents.

I see an opportunity to come back to the parents. “Are they (your parents) busy?”

Not really. They seldom work overtime.

“And not on weekends?”

They do. My mom works every Saturday and my dad sometimes also needs to work on Saturday, but they rest on most of the Sundays.

“So what do you mean by ‘working overtime’ then?”

Night shift. My dad worked on night shift several times in my memories.
“Ok, so they work from eight in the morning and get back at five in the afternoon?”

No, much later than that. The start from eight in the morning and can get back at around seven or eight in the evening. Many times 8 p.m.

My mind feels stuck for a moment on her concept of being busy. I stutter a bit but quickly resume. “Who takes care of your younger brother then?”

I cook for him.

“When did you start cooking for him?”

Since my Year 7.

“You start cooking from Year 7? And your mom and dad are still not happy with you?”

I cannot help expressing my surprise. I suddenly realise that I feel a bit angry towards her parents and a bias against her parents also grows in me as I think that it is likely that she was taken back to the parents because she is old enough to take care of the younger brother. I am envious of her mom, too, as my son is in Year 7, and he knows nothing about cooking.

“Do you feel wrongly done by your parents?”

I know they are not living an easy life, but I guess I am just too painful inside and sometimes unwell. So the best I can do is not to talk I guess. (Sobbing again.) I guess I have just been too lazy.

“Are you lazy? And who says that?” I stutter again.

My mom always comments to me that I am too lazy.

“You can cook for your brother and they still think you are lazy? Then what is not lazy in their eyes?”

Settle everything before they get back home, or do the dishwashing without them telling me after the dinner.

“Have you shared this problem with any of your teachers, I mean you are almost not on talking terms with the parents?”

No.

“Why?”

I don’t think it helps. What can they do? The most they can do is to tell me to be good at home and study more during my time back home.

“When did you start falling back in your schooling?”

From my junior middle school, Year 7. I couldn’t catch up very well, coming from the countryside in Year 7, and I might have played much in Year 8.

“What do you mean by ‘you couldn’t catch up well’?”
Probably we have used the different text books and I had never learned English when in the hometown, and all other classmates seemed excellent in English while I know nothing about it. I strongly feel my inferiority. Back in hometown, we learn only Chinese and math. So when in Year 7, it seems that all other classmates are good at English. But I know nothing.

“Any extra school classes your parents offer you to solve this problem?”

No. Dad bought me a point reading machine.

Again, I feel hopeless, but also feel a need to find a solution to this problem—perhaps slipping out of my research role. Most city children start learning English on their first day at the preschool stage, and some city schools in economically advanced areas offer native English speaker’s teaching for English classes. Judging from the schooling resources, competition in schooling for people like Jiao seems doomed from the very day they were shifted to the city. At the thought that at least some quality family time can help her gain strength to better communicate with the parents, I ask about family trips.

We had some during my schooling Year 7 to 9.

“Where do you usually go for a family trip?”

We went to the shopping area in Jing An, or the theme park like the Myth Island.

“Not museum?”

I don’t like museum. I like hanging out with friend in the street, sometimes for window shopping. I don’t like those things (in the museum).

“Have you visited the museum during the school-organised schooling trip?”

I have never been on a schooling trip.

“Why?”

It costs and I heard that it is not funny at all, so I myself don’t want to go.

I must have been too absorbed by this unexpected answer that I fail to even start persuading her to make up with her parents. The concept of a family trip, as does the concept of being ‘busy’, varies too dramatically for me to understand her world. The shopping area in Jing An is where the people who work in the factories usually visit for leisure, and goods there are not attractive to me. I feel a bit overwhelmed by the gap between Jiao’s world and mine.

“What do you want to do most in high school?”

Best play and learn both well.

“More specific?”
I don’t like sitting there all day studying. So exhausted simply by the thinking of it. Some of my classmates can sit there, not moving at all for a whole day. I don’t feel good at that.

“How much water do you drink per day?”

Very little. Several sips in the morning and several in the afternoon.

“Mom will worry about your health?”

Yes, she does.

We also talk about other things. She has 150 RMB (NZ $30) weekly for her living expenses. And sometimes she chooses not to eat to save for beautiful things she longs for, clothes or shoes. Her mother is unhappy with what she buys, because she does not seem to need them.

I encourage her to envisage a future in five years’ time, and she cannot do that. But the ideal life in her eyes is that she does not need to worry about survival without too much overtime work. As for what kind of work, she has no idea. When asked if she has any questions for me, she thinks for a while and cannot ask any. I finish the interview, feeling hopeless and helpless.

8.2. Gao and the Malfunction of Schooling

Gao is a 17-year-old young male in Class 6, Year 10. Having to sit in the classroom hour after hour, day after day, Gao feels physically trapped. But he finds a way to release himself, by ‘teleporting’ himself into some other dimensions on a spree, or an adventurous journey, or through a romantic but sentimental relationship and many other joys. He reads novels, obsessively, one after another, in class time.

The glasses he wears are thick, but he chooses to sit in the last row; after all, he doesn’t look up at the whiteboard much. He is tall, and the desk seems too small for him—too small to cover up his “disrespectful and incongruous” classroom behaviour. He could get some concealment from the high pile of textbooks and exercise books on the desk, as some other classmates do, but he does not seem to care. All his teachers notice this, and he has been spoken to several times. Gao, in his weekly self-management summary, writes about his remorse for reading novels in class, but he also admits that he cannot control himself.

There are fluorescent tubes in the ceiling of the corridor outside the classroom. The classroom is brighter, though, like daytime, during the night classes. But it is all darkness outside at around 7:40 p.m. Gao stands beside me, one leg slightly bent forward to let his upper body lean toward with his two forearms against the steel frame. Tall and thin, his face
is pale, typical southern Chinese, angular with prominent cheekbones. I cannot make eye
contact with him behind the thick lens. He stands, emotionless, looking into the darkness,
obediently waiting for my questions. He stutters at the beginning of our conversation because
I start with his reading novels in class time. He must have well inured himself against the
lectures given by the adults—the teachers and parents—on his “improper” behaviour, and he
effortlessly gives what he assumes I, another adult, might have expected,fluently blaming
himself.

He denies his obsession with novels, but he confesses that he only stops when he becomes
too tired to read. We talk about the novels he reads and his most-loved heroes. He cares little
about the fame of the author or the genre of the writing, but much about the plot; it must be
hilarious or thrilling enough to carry his mind away from where he exists, leaving his life
behind as if in need of a breathing space, or some respite constructed somewhere in the
novels. He started dosing himself with this hobby when school life in Year 9 had turned, for a
young human being of 15 years of age, too dreary and bleak.

I yearned for a rest from the drudgery of those last-stage revisions in Year 9 for the
high school examination. I was not good at managing myself. I also know that it was
not a good use of time reading many novels. But it was so tiring.

He progressively develops into a book addict.

Passively, but submissively, he answers questions from me until I invite him to think
critically about the adults’ apparently punitive assessment of him.

“Why do you agree that reading many novels is not good?”

It is bad because it may leave me inadequate time to finish the homework.

“Have you once heard that interest might be the best motivation for learning?” He thinks,
pauses and says:

Don’t know. Probably it was the education I got when I was very young. I was told
that reading too many novels at this stage is harmful.

“Has it, for once, occurred to you that the adults might be wrong too?”

Yes (no hesitation this time). More than once but I dare not say.

He imperceptibly shrugs his shoulders and promptly returns to his motionless posture. Our
conversation becomes freer at this point probably because he might have perceived that I,
instead of judging, am trying to understand him. And our conversation soon drifts onto his
life.
At face value, he can be seen as lucky. He has M City hukou; he is from an intact family and his family owns a property. By “intact” I mean that his parents are not divorced; and the property is, though at the edge of the city, a three-floored building with a yard, within walking distance of a delightful beach and adjacent to the international airport. He is the only child in the family, and his grandparents are living together with them. By Chinese traditional family values, he is, presumably, the sweetheart to all.

His lived experience, however, tells a different story.

His grandparents, in their early 60s, are indigenous fishermen. The grandfather is engaged in sea fishing from time to time. The grandmother, thanks to tourism development in the last decade, has become a dishwasher in a nearby food store. Gao sometimes receives pocket money from them. Although born into a fisherman’s family, neither Gao nor Gao’s father know anything about fishing anymore; the grandfather rarely talks about it. Gao has no interest in knowing about that either. Romantic images from my perspective, such as walking along the beach in the cool wind in summer evening, or in the moonlight, enjoying the flickering saffron yellow lights from the fishing boats in the water under a starry sky, must have been so trivial for them that Gao has no such memory at all.

Gao used to feel close to his grandparents, as they looked after him for most of his childhood. It had been his grandfather, he remembers, who occasionally got up early and cooked him porridge for breakfast. But the beginning of his secondary schooling seemed to upset that closeness. From Year 7, he, then an 11-year-old, had to leave home at 6:30 a.m. to catch the 6:50 a.m. bus. The bus number, 704, and its schedule, still stands out in his memory of that experience—in those days it was the only means of commuting between home and S Junior Middle School, the school zone in which he lived. It took him 35 minutes by bus to arrive at school in the morning. For lunch he had to eat in the nearby food store. After lunchtime he was allowed to nap, slouched over the desk in the classroom. School finished at around 5:00 p.m. and he usually stayed for another hour or so to do his homework and left school around 6:30 for home. He could arrive home at around 7:30 p.m. if the bus was on schedule. Sometimes it was 10:30 p.m. when he got home, starved, bored and tired.

What seems enigmatic to Gao is that as his conversation with other family members diminishes, the dialogue has disappeared. All the adults demand is his submission; once he argues back, he gets beaten up. He learns his lesson and is made to resign himself, with some reticence, to all the lectures and reproaches about whatever he had or would have done.
This, however, was not what genuinely confounds the family kinship.

Trouble in life came in Year 5, in primary school. Before that, there were memories of some happy moments: the paradise he and his mates made out of the sand pile beside the school gate; games of glass marbles they once played; and the romps during class breaks. But, confusingly, all of a sudden, it seemed to Gao, he became lonely in the playground.

_Eighty percent of my playmates, maybe higher, I can be sure about that figure, stay home playing internet games and the rest are caged to extra-class learning. It was then that I started to play computer games, and gradually I become addicted to them._

When reminiscing, he does not see many options and remembers receiving no help from his family.

Gao describes his father as eccentric and formidable, and he now seldom talks to him, not even during weekends when they are together. The father, a junior middle school graduate, who is just forty, used to work as a mechanic in a garage. But, for some reason no one knows, he stopped working when Gao entered Year 5. Ever since then, he has stayed in his bedroom most of the time, reading novels, sleeping and playing internet games. Once in a while, he goes out to help his friends fix their cars. Gao’s mother managed to get his father a casual job at the airport, but he did not go. Too tiring. All the relatives in the family had pleaded with Gao not to follow his father. He is not a good role model. Gao does not know how to comment on his father, as he knows little about him—what novels the father reads, what games he plays and what pressures he has in life. The father might, understandably, have hoped Gao would perform better and achieve a more fulfilled life, but whenever the father felt a need to instruct his son, Gao suffers either chiding or physical violence. Gradually, Gao becomes unwilling to initiate any talk with the father.

_Better not, as I don’t know what to say and what might irritate him and bring me another beating._

The mother, a senior middle school graduate, now working as a casual cleaner at the airport, is we may assume the one who loves most her only son. Yet, to Gao, his mother’s love is strictly confined to washing his clothes and shoes. He has no memory of getting a hug or a kiss from his mother, not even when he is feeling low. Other than asking about his preference over the daily necessities, their communication seems barren.

_When talking, she asks and I answer. It always ends with her nagging at my dumb hobbies or my sucky test scores._
“Does she know about your interests and your plans for your future?”

_She had never asked about my interest or my plan for a future. None of my family did that, not once._

Gao reflected, and all in a placid tone. The most agonising memories also relate to his mother, with the question whether he gets beaten by the family.

_Taking a beating, to me, is common fare in life. All my family have done that to me. I cannot remember and I don’t know exactly why they chose to beat me up. Maybe because I was too naughty I guess. Well, sometimes they would punch me simply because I did not follow their orders. When I was 8 or 9 years old, in Year 3, I was sleeping in my mom’s room in the summer. It was very hot and I had my bed in their room for the air conditioner. She ordered me to turn off the light one night, and I didn’t. She smacked me and took my bed apart. I turned the light off and I was allowed to go on sleeping._

“How they beat, I mean, they used their hands and feet?”

_Na (he sounds sneering at my word). They use sticks. Thumb-thick sticks._

“Can we also talk about what might be the worst, unhappiest experience in your past?”

_I remember that. At that time, the computer was in my parents’ room. One day mom went shopping and she warned me not to play the computer games too much. But I wanted to play. She then tied me up to the Lychee tree in the yard and lashed me. She didn’t let me go until I promised that I would not play too much._

“How old were you then?”

_About 11 or 12 (He stands there still, staring into the darkness)._ Stating those seemingly traumatising events from his life, unemotionally, he sounds as if he has never got hurt at all. He loves his mother. In the last summer holiday he worked loading food boxes into plane cabin sat the nearby airport for two weeks and was paid 1,400 RMB (approximately NZ $220). He spent 600RMB buying himself a mobile phone and gave all the rest to his mother. Mom was happy.

When I share with Gao that my ten-year-old son’s hobby is computer games, he starts talking before I finish my words. We talk about his favourite game, what game interests him most, and, finally, we talk about his ideal and schooling.

“So novels are not what you like most?”
No, not at all. I love computer games. They are more exciting, taking me to fight in another life.

“Have you thought about what do you want to be in the future?”
Yes, I want to be a programmer most.

“Can you write programmes?”
No, I have never acquired any knowledge of that. Schools don't teach that.

“Do you plan to learn it by yourself?”
I would like to, but don’t know how.

“Can your family help?”
No, they couldn’t help with my learning ever since Year 7.

“What if you meet some problems in study?”
I ask help from my classmates.

“Why not the teachers?”
Well, the teachers surely could provide a method more efficient to solve my problem, but I felt it more interesting and fun to discuss with the classmates.

“Do you have any questions to ask me?”
Don’t know... how to learn English well? My English study was good in primary school, but I didn’t work on it when I was in Year 7. I didn’t listen to the teacher in class.

“Why?”
She didn’t treat me well.

“How a teacher treats you can make you think that she is nice?”
I cannot be sure when a teacher is nice to me but I can feel it when she is not.

“How?”
In class time she punished me for nothing. I mean I might have swirled my pen in my fingers. But that didn’t bother anyone else...? And doing that helped me think and focus better. But she didn’t allow that and kept me standing for a whole class.

I become speechless for a moment and try hard to move on. “Do you mean you learn for the teachers?”
No. And my family used to ask me the same question. But I didn’t think that much and I didn’t understand then.

When it comes to his future, Gao does not appear to understand how far he has been left behind in terms of the test scores. He plans to go to university and he would like to try
gaokao twice, if possible. But he answers “yes”, after a moment of hesitation when I ask if he would consider entering a vocational school, in case he cannot make university. The prospect of a job for a vocational school graduate is on the assembly line of some electronic factories, for example, working 12 hours a day and 7 days a week. I am not sure whether he is aware of that. But he mentions the factory job without any resistance, and he heard that from his former classmates who ended up in vocational schools.
Chapter Nine: The School Staff

9.1. Han—A Principal’s Theorising on Power and School Management

The interview with Han is opportunistic, yet unexpectedly productive. As agreed at the first meeting with Han, I arrive several minutes before 9 a.m. on Friday, 5 December 2014, to wait to meet Lin, the Deputy Principal in charge of the senior section.

Sitting in the gatekeepers’ area, if focused, one can hear the sound of a speech from the amplifiers in the school playground, which is across the 20-metre wide road and opposite the school gate. It is the annual school sports meeting. Conventionally, it starts with the school leader’s speech. When the hullabaloo is heard, I can tell from the beating of drums and gong that the opening ceremony has started. About ten minutes later, Han appears at the school gate. Jun, the gatekeeper, sees him and informs me. I stand up and go out to meet him.

We shake hands, and he tells me straight:

I have seen Lin this morning, but he is going to sit in an open classroom teaching in C Secondary School, so he cannot make it today. But I have informed him of your coming and staying in one of our classrooms. No problem and you can start what you need to do whenever you like.

Some male students come up to him at this time and talk with him in Cantonese. Then a grandmother and her granddaughter come past the gate, and they talk to Han too. The way he relates to people spontaneously is what impresses me: the boys are not reserved, talking with him, and he jokes back.

I wait, moving between having a look at the sports meeting and a talk with Han. He grants me the access, and he probably plays a big role in helping maintain the access for the following ten weeks. Serendipity also lies in the fact that it is the sports meeting day and he has already absented himself from the ceremony. If I do not take this opportunity, I would have to go through a procedure of visiting and booking a time with him. I take the initiative and ask whether he has time for a talk. He agrees and decides to chat with me at the janitor’s office. He is voluble and our talk lasts about two hours.

In his mid-fifties, he looks younger than his age. His forearms are pale but they look strong, with some muscles evident, probably denoting his experience of being a Physical Education teacher for over thirty years. Not tall, but in fit shape, he seems as though he still benefits
from regular exercise. His hair, short and well-dyed and cut, looks black and shining. Unlike Jun, Han’s eyes are usually fixed and firm, and his smile confident.

Born in 1959, Han is an M City local who started teaching when he turned 17, as a villager-funded teacher for four years, with a monthly payment of 27 RMB (approximately NZ $5). Villager-funded teachers are the group in rural citizen-managed schools that do not receive the normal remuneration from the government. Han sat gaokao in the second year when gaokao was resumed by the government after the ten years havoc of the Cultural Revolution, and he was admitted into a normal school. At his graduation, believing his educational and teaching background would suffice to secure himself a schooling job, he did not ask favour from his uncles, who were then officials in local Bureau of Education in D District. As a result, Han was relocated to teach in M School in J District, a newly-established school in a district still in a stage of incipient disorder and isolation.

For many years he regretted his naïve behaviour in social life, but chose to master the fait accompli and get the best reward from what he had. As a sort of remuneration for his settling down in M School, he negotiated and managed to secure bianzhi for his newly married wife, who used to be a villager-funded teacher. This was significant at that time because bianzhi means a permanent, well-paid position. Another reason for Han to stay, he recalls, was that the monthly salary at that time in J District was double of that of D District, where he was born. Even now there is an imbalance in teachers’ salaries in M City: the monthly payment for a teacher in J district is 1000 RMB (NZ$260) higher than that of D district, but approximately the same amount lower than that of X District, where the city centre is located. But Han did suffer, he highlights, from weekly departures from his bride for a whole year, because the only transportation from J District to other places was by ferry.

Now, having worked in the school for more than 30 years, Han has been referred to as the Big Brother by school staff, with a nickname of the ‘pillar of the school’, which both Yu and Feng had mentioned to me. He impresses me as an easy-going and caring elder brother, and he might also see himself as such. He frankly admits that his words count in the school and he shows no intention of hiding the fact of his being socially powerful and experienced. J District is, to him, too small a place, where he has close relationships with both government officialdom and gangster society. He has built a personal guanxi network, so powerful that he proves himself a skilled problem solver to his superiors, caring leader to his colleagues, and a reliable husband and father to his family.
In the eyes of his colleagues, he is reliable. The latest case is how he helped make funeral arrangements for the late husband of a female teacher in the school. Reflecting on this, he recalls and shares his philosophy for dealing with his colleagues:

*Helping others in my perspective is reciprocal. Managing a school can be very tricky and daunting to most people. But in my case I will not do all the job all by myself. I have my staff, my subordinates. I make a phone call and my people can solve the problems for me. The key is how to get people to follow you and sincerely share your burdens. In my case it is the charisma/personality ethic, it is my feelings/affection towards them. I will be there for them, ready to help, whenever they are in trouble. I help them handle their problems, which sometimes are beyond their power. Once they perceived that I am willing to spare them from troubles and share their burden, they will feel convinced that I might be worthy of following, and they are willing to work for me. If without proper knowledge and experience, managing a school can be extremely consuming and exhausting. Working on one’s own will not do. The Principal is supposed to rely on his team of middle management and senior staff, who, in turn, are expected to rely a lot on their subordinates. If not, the Principal will be exhausted by the position. I am now taking responsibility for the junior section, more than 30 classes, but I manage well and I can have a lot leisure time. Actually, for most of the time I stay in my office, chatting and having tea with my staff. If time permits, I would go for an inspection tour and see how the teachers and the students are doing. Once I detect some potential issues, I will go talking with the team leader or the particular teacher. If they are experiencing some hardships, say from some naughty students or somewhere else, I will try my best to help.*

“So you meet and talk with your staff frequently?” I ask.

*Sure, quite often. They enjoy meeting and spending time with me; we always have open-minded conversation. We talk everything. To me, whatever the achievement I have got, I rely on them and they help to make it happen. The superior would have no idea as which individual teacher has contributed a lot to the accomplishment, but they know who is in charge and taking the lead. They would not say which teacher has done an excellent job; instead they would comment that Principal Han has done a great job. It is I that know which individual teacher teaches well. How can the superior in the Bureau of Education know about that?*

I take his cue and ask how he makes judgements about the teaching quality of his staff.
I judge according to the students’ feedback. I specialise in physical education, so I cannot understand a class of English or Maths. But the students’ reaction towards the teacher in the classroom must be telling. The students won’t pretend that they are interested in what the teacher’s talking in the class.

“Well, that is a bit unexpected, because I had expected that you would say it was the test paper scores that mainly help form your judgement.”

You are not wrong. The students’ test scores play a critical role in judging the teaching quality. Say, if a teacher asks a question, is there any students raising their hand to answer? How many and how well can they answer? If the students can get the correct answer, it shows, to me, that the teacher has done a good job because he/she make the student understand well about the point in the knowledge. Sometimes I can judge but I cannot explain how. It is mainly about the students’ reaction. If, in the class, the teacher is busy talking while the students busy with their own stuff, what’s the use of having that teacher?

“How would you act once you had found that a particular teacher might be problematic?”

I usually will start with appreciating his strengths and then point out the problems. I would not criticise. We are all human beings and we all like hearing nice words from others. No one likes being attacked. In our meeting, I had never talked about problems by anyone’s name. It is all about the happening. But I will talk in private with the individual. It is very important that you save people’s face and give them enough face.

We are interrupted by his mobile, and I ask whether we still have time for our conversation.

Sure, it is about the sports meeting and we can communicate through phone call. But if it is about some teacher calling for my help, I may need to go. I find myself enjoying our talking.

“Thanks. So you will try to talk with an individual teacher about their problem privately to save their face?” We continue.

Yes, I did this not only to the teachers, but also to the students. If any student has been told off to me for some of his mischief, I will go and ask him out and talk. It would be difficult for anyone to get reprimanded in public. Yesterday, two girl students played mobile while in class. I asked them to come to me and they didn’t dare. They must have been scared. I went up to them and asked why not follow my word and come to me. Then I took them out of the classroom and told them that no need to be afraid of
Principal Han. I told them that Principal Han is a kind person, don’t worry, I would not confiscate your mobile as this is the first time you committed this mistake. But I need you to realise that it is not right to play your mobile while in class. Mobile is communicative tool and playing with it distracts you from your learning. They apologised and promised that they would never do that again.

“Can I take it that you think it important not to lose the common touch?”

Well, this is my rule. First we should take that the students are human beings and they are children. Be you a teacher or a school leader, it is important that we remember this. I always told the teachers that once you have trouble solving any problems, you come to me and I will try my best to help. I have been in charge of moral education for more than 30 years and I have a quite good relationship with police station and traffic policeman; I also have guanxi with the gangsters. I know them all. To solve problems here needs this mingling guanxi with both circles as gangs and the police...

We get interrupted by a call again and he speaks in Cantonese. I ask if we should stop. He seems to be enjoying our chat:

No worries. It is from one of our former students. He is now a team leader and the director of a lion dance team. He was admitted into Guangdong Institute of Physical Education in 1982, then he worked in the Sports Commission; but he quit and now he is running his own lion dance team. And today he and his team come to play at the opening ceremony for our sports meeting. Usually the team members are weak in academic learning and they get a chance to change their life through this sport.

“I heard sports practitioners might suffer from being biased; people sometimes tease them as having well-developed limbs but the head of a moron. What’s your idea towards this?”

I don’t agree. Many PE teachers are very good problem solvers. They are very flexible and quick-witted, and at the same time loyal to friends. We also had some top city leaders who used to be PE teachers. They are model of success...

We are interrupted again by a young female PE teacher coming to Han for the key of the room where she can get a first-aid kit. I am curious about his being the School Branch Party Secretary, so I ask about this position.

This supposedly is a powerful position, but only in colleges or universities, not in secondary schools.

“May I know specifically what you do in this job?”
Nothing much. Organising a meeting for Party member once a semester. As for the work of collecting Party fees, some other member in charge of organisational work will do that job.

“Can I ask about the meeting content?”

Nothing new other than following suit—follow-the-leader (the Party leader), to keep abreast of changing conditions through studying the new policies by the new leaders of the Party.

“This position functions differently in different levels of schooling institutions, as you mentioned just now, say, the secondary schools and the universities. Is this a convention or regulation?”

It is convention. In primary and secondary schools, it is the Principal that takes the accountability and make the decisions, including personnel and budget/financial decisions. The Party Secretary of the school branch is nothing more than a beautiful title, without much real power. I personally didn’t want this title, but I was talked to by the Town Branch Party Secretary and the General Director of the District Bureau of Education several times about taking this position. I should give them face; so I took this position.

“You don’t care much about your job titles?”

I am a person willing to assume responsibilities and solve practical problems while caring less about personal social position. My motto is I am fine with whatever the position assigned to me so long as I do not fail my school, my superior and the colleagues. In 1991, the Director of The District General Working Union worked to transfer me to work for them while I was the Director of General Affairs in our school. That Director used to be the Deputy Principal of our school and he knew well about my working ethos. But the Principal didn’t allow me to go because I was such a worker that he had difficulties running the school without me. I had to let this opportunity go for the sake of my good personal relationship with the Principal. The Principal then planned to promote me to the position of the Deputy of Principal in 1992, but we didn’t succeed until 1997, because of my educational certification. They once planned to shift me to work as a Deputy Principal in the Third Secondary School in S Town, in the same district, but about thirty minutes driving from J District.

“Why?”
They needed experienced and skilful managing staff in that newly established school. I declined. My wife has been here and wouldn’t like me running far to work. I would not go even if they could assign me as the Principal, let alone the Deputy Principal. In 2002, I had opportunity to become the Principal, but I have been unwilling to do that.

“For what?”

The Principal is having too much pressure and I am better to be an assistant to that position. (What kind of pressure?) Being a principal, one needs to have a comprehensive concept of many things. To entertain the administrative institutions has been the main piece of accountability for a Principal, besides managing the teaching staff. I am unwilling to face those institutional authorities.

“Are you telling me that the main source for the pressure of a Principal’s work comes from entertaining the superior administration?”

The accountability undertaken by a Principal in a secondary school seems multi-dimensional. For vertically upward direction, a Principal is expected to be able to entertain the visits and inspections from institutions of higher level administration; and downwardly he should be able to manage his subordinates; for example, he should think about what kind of schooling ethos he aims to build and how to get people to work for him; horizontally, the position requires a close relationship to other social organisations, say the police station, Bureau of Traffic Administration, Fair Department etc. in order to tackle with schooling emergencies. In addition, the teaching and test achievements are very critical too. If he cannot manage to improve that achievement, he will get criticised by name at the meeting held in the District Bureau of Education. As a Deputy Principal, I don’t have to hear that...

And then he talks about how, for the several crises and havoc that M school has been through in the past, he stood out and managed the chaos. A 14-year-old boy from M school died in 2011 from school bullying; he was the only boy with four older sisters in his family. Following the news, Han was among the first to arrive, and due to the guanxi he has, he was able to have people from the local traffic police brigade come and manage the traffic. He also called for his policemen friends, who came instantly to help to keep the campus order. Faced with the furious and devastated parents, he did not run away, and he managed to engage in dialogue instead. When the Principal was surrounded by the victim’s family in the police office, Han was able to break the deadlock, and he brought the Principal out. He resorted to his lawyer friends, and the lawyers went to persuade the family to solve the issue outside
court. Suing the school via the court would harm the school’s reputation, and the school was willing to pay more if the issue was solved ‘under the table’, quietly. Han still feels pity for that family because they were still determined to sue, but they, in the end, received much less paid for their young boy’s life.

A 16-year-old boy from the school died in a traffic accident in 2013 and two 15-year-old boys drowned in a pond in 2014. While some other school leaders might prefer to distance themselves, Han feels it his unshakeable duty to take the accountability for the school.

But for all the special contribution he has made for the school, Han has not made his way to Principalship. Some of his colleagues comment that his personal ability has gone far beyond his current position, but he does not want to ‘buy’ positions; being either money conscious or conscience conscious, he declines to become involved in bribery for money. Others comment that the main reason for lack of progression to Principal is his profession—Physical Education—a job which does not possess core value in gaokao. Some share with me information that Han’s timing is not good: when it is his time to be the Principal, Zhang was raised to the position of Principal from being an ordinary teacher, because his wife’s uncle became the city mayor, which could spare him from working all the way through from middle management to Deputy Principal and then to Principal. But Han does not mention that.

Because he is affable, I speak candidly: “You don’t care much about your job title while willing to assume that much accountability; well, this is hard for me to understand.” He smiles:

**Well, when I meet people, they address me as Principal Han, not the Deputy Principal Han.**

“But you do not have the power?”

**At least I do not suffer that pressure. The more power one has, the easier and sooner for one to fall. Our previous principal, the one who had been shifted to S town, is now serving five years’ imprisonment. He didn’t govern well and one of the teachers bore grudges against him, and that was where the root of his disaster lay and consequently a minor mistake by him was magnified. He accepted, in all those years being a Principal, about 380,000 RMB (approximately NZ$90,000) as lishi (Cantonese for auspicious money for a new year). The money was given to his son from some of his boss friends. Such a small amount of money for a principal now in China...**
He talks more about this, but I do not think it proper to include that information here, for Han’s sake. He also talks about his relationship with the previous Principal:

He was the Principal in our school during 2005 and 2007 and I co-worked with him. He had high trust in me and he once told me that for all the years of his being a principal, for the first time he had tasted the pleasure of getting off work only since I had co-worked with him. I told him that he could choose to come and get off school whenever he felt like with me helping manage the school; and I would resort to him for tasks out of my reach. I could make him assured that I had the required skills and ability to run the school. In this town, there is very little I cannot work out. But I would rather leave this school at some time and I went to have a talk with the Director of our local Educational Bureau last August. Although I have a positive attitude towards the title and enjoy the peace of mind among chaos… I feel we are having quite different personnel policy in our school now...

For the first time, he hesitates in our conversation, possibly he is thinking about the Principal. He shifts our talk to other topics.

“But certainly it will hurt when you decide to leave? I mean you have been working here for more than 30 years and have been working hard for the school’s benefit. Does it mean you sometimes feel upset?” I ask.

I do sometimes feel unhappy with what we are doing now. (He pauses). In 2012, as you may have heard about it, which I think only happened here in all China, almost all the middle management staff in our school, eight of them, quit, including the Director of our General Office. You must understand this: the most lucrative position in the school might be the Director of our General Office; and even he decided to quit that position. You understand this? I don’t talk about this… But the problem is why so many people quit? …We are not using the right person...

He shifts our talk to his opinion about one of the female Deputy Principals and how she obtained her position. We are stopped by several teachers leaving school for lunch, and we decide to end our talk and go for lunch.

After this fieldwork was completed, the Principal was arrested, so was his wife’s uncle—throwing Han’s comments into sharp relief.
9.2. Jun—A School Gatekeeper

For an in-depth understanding of a school gatekeeper’s daily life, a talk with one of them while on duty seems more productive than an arranged official interview at a predetermined school office.

Jun is on duty when I interview Han, and certain aspects of his behaviour appeal to me as a researcher. I have checked it is Jun on duty that morning. I greet him and ask for permission to stay in the Janitor’s Office for a while. I do not explain who I am and why I am there; I had covered that with Han on a previous day, and I, as required by the University of Auckland ethical protocols, have given Jun my name card. Besides, we have met several times, either at the school or on my way to the school. He nods that I can sit down if I wish; I choose the chair near the window, a vantage point for observing the gate area. The seat I have chosen might be his place. He chooses to sit in another chair, facing the supervision screen, about two to three metres away, with a remote key for the school gate in his left hand.

As always, he is in his dark blue security uniform. His face is lean and pale; the three fine lines on his forehead and the wrinkles at the outer corners of his eyes suggest the ups and downs of life. His eyes show a trace of weariness. It must be a consequence of his night shifts.

Not very tactfully, he declines my request to record, and I had expected that. Judging from his outward appearance, Jun must have experienced most of the 50 years’ vicissitudes inscribed in the social and eco-political changes in contemporary mainland China. It is not difficult to understand his vigilance with some knowledge of what had happened in China: the Cultural Revolution, the policy of relocating educated urban youth to work in the countryside and mountainous areas, then the economic reform and its concomitant transformation of culture and ideology, etc.

We start with how long he has been working at this school. It has been ten years. His answer is short. It is fair that he resorts to ‘the weapon of the weak’ (Scott, 1985), faced with an ‘intruder’. But I have confidence in developing a fruitful conversation: for one reason, instead of focusing on collecting data for my research, I aim for a dialogue, inviting him to reflect on his own living experience; for another, essentially, almost everyone wants or needs to talk about themselves (Sereny, 1974).

I then ask his reason for enlistment.

> Nothing special but to find a way to survive.
Then about his origin.

_The countryside._

“Is there any difference between the countryside and city nowadays?” I asked tentatively.

_Of course, (he doesn’t hesitate) much difference between rural and urban hukou._

“I heard that rural hukou nowadays can be more valuable, because the villagers have an opportunity to become土豪/tuhao (a recently invented word meaning for the local tyrant to become one of the nouveau riche) overnight by selling their farmland?”

_Well, all the farmlands are under the control of the village head and officials. It is reported that the villagers own their lands, but can they really have a say over the decision of selling it or not?_

With this, he laughs sardonically; but he promptly resumes his aloofness, noticing that I am looking at him. Or he might sense my feigned naivety? I am not sure. I nod in silence, thinking about a reply, but in vain.

“What can you tell me something about your living experience?” I calculate my chance and start my interview.

_My experience? I don’t have any significant/ glamorous/splendid or glorious experience._

With a brief splutter of laughter, he replies, scuttling away my invitation.

“What can be taken as a splendid and glorious deed in your eyes?” I need to keep the conversation flowing “with increasing intensity” to the point that he could both ask and answer his own questions (Sereny, 1974).

Jun gives it some brief thought and answers very honestly: A stable job, or a stable income? Isn’t it? I mean, I don’t expect much. All I admire is having a job with bianzhi (formal employment).

The term bianzhi has been the turning point in our conversation, whereupon he starts to tell his stories. Born in 1961, he had little chance to get much schooling, due to the national political movement of the times. Joining the army used to be a good way to make a change for a young man from the countryside, so he did this. When demobilised, he became a worker in a factory. After about twenty years of working, many SOEs (state-owned enterprises), including his, went bankrupt, so he got laid off at his mid-forties, a social phenomenon labelled in China as ‘the travail of economic reform’. At an awkward age, and lacking updated skills, he became a gatekeeper. “A way to survive”, in his words.
“Have you ever felt that you were deceived by our government? I mean those policies for the laid off workers?” I probe. He laughs dryly but turns circumspect around my being critical of the government.

Deceptive? That is your word, I say nothing.

“Sure, my word. You seem wary. Why is that? Is that a consequence of your military service experience?” I continue. This pathological precariousness was not unfamiliar with me. My late father, who was truly tormented through the Cultural Revolution, due to the excuse that he was from a businessman’s family background, once summarised his whole life as “being terrified and like walking on thin ice”. He keeps silent, thinking.

“Or you suffered from …?” I try to find a germane term for the occasion.

Whether I was traumatised?

Jun helps me out. He grins and examines me for a clue to my intention for a second, and then turns his eyes back to the screen. I notice that his eyes seldom leave the screen while talking with me, and he has retracted the school gate twice, for two teachers, during the time we have been speaking. For a moment he looks reminiscent, in silence, his eyes fixed in the direction of the screen. At the moment that I plan to reduce this intensity, he starts, calmly.

No. It is because I need this job on which my pension depends.

Jun then suddenly stands up and walks out, enquiring of a stranger at the gate. The stranger turns out to be a worker from the construction site for the school gymnasium, which is across the road in front of the school campus. He comes to use the school toilet. Jun lets him through. He comes back and we go on with a new topic: his work. I let go the previous question; though eager for information, I do not feel it ethical to pressurise or implore. Besides, I sense I would not get much more on that question.

Jun raises no complaint over his working conditions: eight hours every day, seven days a week, a weekly shift of night duty, no holidays, and no year-end bonus. Well, actually, one day off in a month. Having worked at the school for ten years, his monthly income is about 2200 RMB (NZ$450), a figure approximately one-fifth or one-sixth of those school staff with bianzhi. Among eight gatekeepers, only one has bianzhi. Left with very few options, Jun plans to stay on this job for another six years, until he can retire. His pension, as he mentions, largely depends on this job. He makes no bones about the fact that, to these gatekeepers, people like me can be quite daunting:
We are all alert to people like you, I mean people holding a notebook and a pen and a smartphone, in that you might be doing some secret inspection of our behaviour on duty. Our job will be in peril if they find us stumbling on duty. And besides, we were notified not to talk with any press without permission from the superior.

Ok, this explains his vigilance. He does say that I look even more terrifying than a terrorist to security personnel like himself! But this evokes my curiosity.

“Why? You gatekeepers to people like me—as a parent, or as a researcher—are physically the first threshold to the school?”

Not necessarily. (He chuckles a bit.) Some of the visitors can be very ill-mannered and can talk mean. Counting on their power or wealth, they usually ignore us. We are invisible to them and if we approach to do the required enquiry, which is our duty, they talk dirty back. What can we do? No use calling the police. (Resignation on his face.)

A middle-aged woman appears in the gate area section on the screen. Jun sees her, but he does not move.

She is from the nearby eatery and comes to deliver some snack food.

He explains. I then notice the white disposable snack box in her hand. Two minutes later, a girl student comes to get it. Then a postman comes. Jun goes out and speaks with him. Then a male student comes for chalk. Jun goes to the inventory room on the first floor of the First Teaching Building and gets two boxes of chalks for the boy. He retracts the school gate for a teacher on his way back to the office. Then a father comes to the gate and asks for access, claiming that his son’s head teacher has invited him on account of his son’s misbehaviour.

“You are very busy when on duty.” I comment, and this seems authentically fitting for the occasion, and he is triggered by it.

Exactly! We are quite busy when on duty. (He concurred, and his discontent germinated with this thinking and he starts talking, unaware of his rising pitch.)

Normally the daytime shift requires two persons. We are actually undertaking double workload here. Han, the Party Secretary of the School Branch, proposed once in their meeting about adding security personnel to this shift. But, it is said that the superior (the local Educational Bureau) refused, for cost saving.
“But they are not short of money,” I follow up; flashing in my mind is the social phenomenon of governmental behaviour, both local and central, of “(year-end) crash expenditure” (突击花钱 / tu ji hua qian) in recent years.

Rich country, poor people. (He resumes his aloofness for a moment; but he continues with the topic of payment for holiday overtime work.) It had been lawfully demanded that people assuming holiday overtime work be paid three times of the usual salary. But we truly get nothing but our shit money. Dare you sue (them)? Through suing, you might be able to win if Fortune smiles on you. But what next?! You absolutely would have to quit. (He stayed silent for a while, brooding. With palpable admiration on his face, he proceeds.) People working in foreign or multinational companies and factories normally can get the extra pay, because those enterprises usually observe the clause of Chinese Labour Law. (A sudden burst of anguish.) That had been written into our Labour Law! The capitalists, those foreign ones, or private-owned enterprises, they often can observe the law; but communist organisations don’t do that. Those, I mean the foreign and private ones, are vulnerable groups, because they may get a fine. But how can you fine state-run institutions? Doing that transaction equates to moving one’s money from his right pocket to his left one. (His talking becomes a bit jumbled; he pauses and continues.) With luck, you might get some compensation (in case you sue), say 50 Yuan (approximately NZ$10). But you become jobless (while you are required to pay for your quota of social security and pension). However hard you try, you get a thin chance to get employed after that.

He stops, with imperceptible agony in his eyes, trying to smile. I nod, thinking about the common law in the job market for a recommendation letter from a previous employer.

It doesn’t work that one party dominates without any check.

He grumbles that comment unexpectedly, and stops himself suddenly. When I become unsure of what language might comfort him or whether I should be ruthless in questioning more, for example about the function of the worker’s union or our one-party rule mechanism, a female student comes with a signed note for leaving. Jun asks for her student card, but she has none.

J (un): Why don’t you have your card with you?

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7Year-end Crash Expenditure: also translated as “Budget flush”, it literally means the “use it or lose it” spending spree that occurs near the end of the fourth quarter in governmental offices. This implies the loopholes existing in the current mechanism in budget preparation, budget approval and budget execution. The mismatch in-between and the endemic misuse of the budget out of the users’ self-interest and imperfect supervision system is the main reason for “Year-end Crash Expenditure” in China.
S(tudent): I will next time. It is in my cupboard.
J: You will be back at ten?
S: Yes, in about half an hour.
J: What kind of leave is this?
S: I need to go out and buy some medicine.

Jun approves and the student leaves, coughing, with a running nose.

“Only one kid in your family?” I take the chance to change our topic.

Yes. I cannot afford to rear a second. To tell the truth, the policy permitted people in my age to have a second birth quota.

“So you didn’t get a second child even when you were allowed to?” This is beyond my comprehension.

If we as a couple are both without a stable income, we can raise a second child, but can we make a talented person out him/her?

“What is your definition of talent?”

Well, at least you should afford him/her a higher education. My son, in year 2004, passed the entrance examination and was admitted to No. 1 Senior Middle School in D District. During that three years, the fees for extra classes, the tuition fee, and the cost for the learning materials were so much that I got an injured hand from paying. In those days, unlike today, there was no stipulation from the Educational Bureau for discarding the schooling habitual conduct of having weekend classes. And we didn’t earn much. For now, I am not sure about the cost for the learning materials, but having the senior middle school students attending the weekend schooling is not permitted. You can have them stay in the classroom, but that should be free of charge. Like the Year 13 students here, now they are having Saturday classes, but for free. But it didn’t work like this in my son’s time. So, you can imagine, what are we supposed to do with a second child? A semester in kindergarten asked for 400 yuan at that time! He shakes his head slightly.

“Are the teachers willing to do extra teaching on weekends?”

No. If asked, those teachers will also say no.

We are interrupted again. A man comes, and Jun retracts the gate without enquiring. This is a stranger to me; not one of the school staff. I ask, and Jun says that he is the boss in charge of the gymnasium construction and he also comes to use the toilet.
“In another nine years you can retire?” I cannot count well.

*What!! Nine years?!* (He protests strongly.) *The male needs to work till sixty. I can retire in the year of 2021, I mean if my heart still can beat. So another six years, not nine!!*

He goes out on a call to fetch more chalk and when he comes back he highlights the need to have extra personnel for the day-time duty. I manage to advance our conversation.

“Has your son got married?” He nods.

“So you should be carefree now? Or should you help to buy their home?” It is very common that Chinese parents help young people buy their home, as the housing prices are unacceptably high. I regret, almost immediately, that I have asked about this.

*With this bag of bones?* (He bursts into a loud guffaw. I understand that; it is not hearty laughter, and I feel sorry that I have stung him. He talks in a tone of self-deprecating humour.) *Very little can be squeezed from my old bones.* (He sighs with deep resignation and a shadow of melancholy.) *A bit more than 2000 RMB a month, I cannot even help with the initial pay.*

The average house price in the city centre is around 15,000 RMB per square metre; the price in J District is around 8000 RMB per square metre. The image of a despondent and helpless father struck me. I did not want to see him suffering more through my questioning.

“Your parents?” I ask, hoping to distract him.

*They are good.*

“So you need to finance them?” If yes, this conversation would be too demanding for me to continue.

*No, their pension is much higher than my income.*

Great, I thought to myself, seeing a favourable turn in our conversation. How come? (How can their pension be higher than your income?)

*They have bianzhi and they retired from some public service institution. So in China, whatever you are doing, one should always prioritise bianzhi. I have a sister and she has bianzhi. Her monthly income is more than ten thousand.*

Turning back to the topic of bianzhi, his talk helps to interpret why some postgraduates in China nowadays would stop at nothing to become a sanitation worker with bianzhi, another controversial, ongoing social phenomenon in China. I am genuinely curious, since all his other family members have bianzhi while he does not. “Why didn’t you manage to get bianzhi?”
(He laughs softly and dryly) My father is a very honest person. A dull person. He is lethargic in developing and nurturing guanxi. He is too proud to condescend himself to ‘patronise’ me. What is your nationality? Are you still Chinese?

Out of nowhere, for the first time, he proposes a question. “Yes. I am currently not working, jobless, no bianzhi. The college where I used to teach is an enterprise-like institution. Like you people, we also need to undertake ‘double workload, with one payment’. Too much for me.”

Are you paid here?

“No, I am working on my thesis. So no income.” I suddenly feel pathetic. We sit in silence. I need to finish this talk at least, so I start again, remembering that I should summarise our talk and invite him to reflect more.

“Your experience is tough, but also typical for your generation. When you became a worker, you would never have expected that you would be sacked and become jobless? I mean the experience of demob…?” I haven’t finished, but he starts.

Well, the experience of demob is nothing special. Hundreds of thousands got demobbed every year. Deng (Xiaoping) once made the decision of military reduction by 2 million. (Full of compliance is his talking now.)

Our talking is interrupted again. He stands up and goes to the supervising screen and tries to recognise the newcomer. It is a teacher of chemistry.

“Can I understand that in terms of salary, twenty years ago when you were a factory worker, you had more or less the same level of income as teachers?” I resume.

That’s true.

“Nowadays, the social status of workers has been falling. But when you look back, say, to about thirty years ago, you should have been feeling pride in yourself being a worker? I mean, at that time, the working class were claimed to be the leaders of our country?”

For all my life, till now, I have never felt pride. Not even once. (He maintains a smile on his face.)

“No even when you serve in the army?”

No. When I was a soldier, I knew it very well that one has no promising future if not successful in enrolling himself into the military colleges. We were all familiar with the saying that ‘consolidated barracks, but rolling soldiers’ (铁打的营盘，流水的兵).
“Not when you were a worker? Were you claimed as a leader of our country?”

He mocks this historical entitlement of Chinese workers, demoting himself as “the master of serving others tea and water”. He expounds that in daguofan (a big-pot distribution system) time, where the more chickens, the less eggs, being a worker meant having a busy but boring life.

One can be neither filled up nor starved to death. So what is pride for? It could be predicted even then that one would stay in low water if one couldn’t get recruited into state-run service institutions.

“Not once, when you became a father?” I press, desperately.

No. Why should I? I have a son, so do others. What’s the pride for? Daughters might be more obedient to the parents.

I am defeated. Wordless. I come to my last question: “Have you ever blamed your parents for this life experience?”

No point blaming anyone else. It is my Ming (fate). It is not that you can get what you work for with effort. Things don’t turn out that way. I just didn’t have that good fortune in life. I couldn’t get the right opportunity. And I didn’t have a strong guanxi. So it is all about my fate/fortune. My definition of good Fate is a combination of good timing, right place and favourable interpersonal relationships. I didn’t have that serendipity in my life.

9.3. Mr Qin—A Teacher’s Story

Later, when I choose to depict Mr Qin, I wonder why he has gradually become such a focus for me. His being cheerful and optimistic, his willingness to talk, his concern over the political and current domestic affairs—the reasons are many; but the most appealing reason seems to be that he is one of the very few people in school who dare to challenge authority and raise his voice, who is willing to fight, and who still enjoys his fight, especially when most people choose to be compliant either by habit or choice. I see in him the individualism which has been missing in Chinese schooling, the sharp critical view most people used to have but have long since lost.

In his mid-forties, Qin is a stout and florid man; he appeals to me in his ‘pot-stirring’ manner in the Teachers’ Office. Knowing that there is a national policy that schooling time for high school students should be no longer than seven hours per teaching day, he takes the initiative
and composes a round robin proposal to the school leader—he suggests shorter schooling hours for students and teachers in the senior section in M School. For me, he presents an image of troublemaker for the school leaders, but he seems to enjoy being that way. When asked whether he fears “穿小鞋/Chuan Xiao Xie” (which can be literally translated as ‘being given tight shoes to wear’ and is often taken as the worst situation an employee can experience as a result of causing trouble for their employer), he says, laughing loudly, that he enjoys that, and he is now so used to that treatment and he feels bored without getting any of that in his daily life.

Raised in an impoverished family, he has worked hard to rid his life of the impoverishment he suffered. Although he was a high achiever in his gaokao he did not have many options aside from teacher training school and the military academy. These were at this time not merely free of educational fees, but also provided their recruits some living subsidies. Teaching was neither his childhood dream nor his personal ideal; he was impelled into a teaching career by his straitened circumstances.

For better payment, he changed his place of work several times; first from the high school where he graduated in his hometown, to the provincial capital in west China, and now, in M Secondary School in southeast China. Along this mobility trajectory, his payment, being a teacher, gradually rose to China’s top level. This is unusual for most Chinese under the rigid hukou system. Usually he can feel that he outshines his peers according to this trajectory, which proves his strength and proficiency, especially when there was a very limited social mobility at the time. But when talking about those former classmates, he feels lost; many classmates, those who used to be inferior to him in terms of schooling achievement, are in his eyes much more successful now than he is. They hold high positions in important government departments or run lucrative businesses. They could afford to learn Economics or Law at that time.

During his 22 years of teaching, however, Qin thought many times of leaving school life, but finally resigned himself to reality.

_I had thought of leaving teaching, but couldn’t make it._ (He stutters, probably because too many thoughts come to him at once; but he quickly resumes his sound logic.) _First, what can you do once you quit. One option is to enter politics and_

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8 Round robin proposal here takes the meaning defined by Oxford English Dictionary: A petition, especially one with signatures written in a circle to conceal the order of writing.
become government officials; but in China, without some social background, it is almost impossible to achieve that, plus it has been explicitly banned that teacher is not allowed to attend the Civil Service Examination (with a forced smile). (Pause.) You can also choose to do business, but that entails necessary capital/seed money or social guanxi. A teacher spends most of their time in classrooms or on campus, consequently they don’t have spare time to build and foster rich social guanxi. Actually, even if they have the required social guanxi, they usually don’t have the money (he laughs loudly again at himself).

But out of his concern for education, he adds:  
Well, taking into consideration the whole situation, it might benefit all in the long run to ban teachers from becoming government officials. I mean under the current mechanism where exists a stark contrast in payment between civil servants and teachers, a lot of competitive teachers will leave school and join the competition for becoming a civil servant; this will cause a brain drain in teaching staff, which surely harms the national education. But ... (Pause) it doesn’t look fair, for the teacher, that the mobility is just blocked.

Clearly, he thinks that the teacher’s social status and image in China is of great concern.  
Teacher in China, to be honest, has long been scorned, for being low in social status hierarchies; their social status is low in China mainly because of a low economic status. The situation hasn’t changed much where the teacher was taken as Chou Lao Jiu (臭老九/ The Stinking Old Ninth/the stinking Number Nine was a term of abuse used by ultra-Leftists for teachers in the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution, when teachers and intellectuals were suppressed and labelled as class enemies, alongside landlords, reactionaries and even spies).

We are very good at producing empty slogans to show our respect to teachers. In fact, teachers’ social image has been deteriorating; people might have lost their trust in teachers and they don’t sincerely like and respect teacher. I had the experience that the parents ‘respected’ me when their kids were in my class, but you are no more than a stranger to them when the kid left your class. (Why?) Well, generally most people are a bit snobbish, which means people judge and adjust their relationship with others through a perspective sometimes on immediate interest in life. The teacher doesn’t have a deep pocket, or strong social guanxi, so, is unhelpful to others in social life.
He has his theory as to why teaching has been pathetic in China.

*It is not without reason that teachers in China nowadays categorise themselves into the vulnerable social group running high risk. Whenever there is a classroom accident, it prompts condemnation against the teacher(s). An impartial social report will allow all stakeholders to raise their voices, and then the public can discuss and comments. But who knows what is going wrong with the medium, they fancy stirring up trouble against teachers. I guess what they really hanker after is how much hush money the schools are willing to pay. Guided by the negative reports from the social media, the public as a result has generally been hostile to teachers in recent years. People start blaming teachers without seeking for the origins of the problems we are having. Consequently, teachers and school leaders have become appalled, as involved teachers and related leaders will get punished leaving the root of the problem untouched.... Well, since there is no way to raise our voice, we had better shush ourselves.*

When talking about individual growth as a teacher, academically in particular, Qin sounds frustrated: (we come to this conversation following my question about his interest in the writings of Lu Xun⁹)

*Well, for writing, I have become lazy...*

“Sorry I don’t mean this, what I really want to know is does the school encourage or require the teachers to get involved in research or...” I try to clarify.

*Well, what do you mean by “require”? I mean when they “require” and “encourage”, do they genuinely or sincerely “require” and “encourage”? Without corresponding incentives, what’s the shit use of “require” and “encourage”? (He becomes a bit muddled at this moment). This has been complicated; as it also relates to self-orientation/positioning, self-promotion and self-formation. I must admit that there are a few special people who might be perseverant in pursuing one’s ideal while totally distancing oneself from the restraint of the social surroundings; there must be. But for most people, they need a proper environment or a proper guiding mechanism to grow. Do we have that? Yes, we have. The reward for publishing a piece of writing is 5*

⁹Lu Xun (1881-1936): Lu Xun was a short story writer, editor, translator, literary critic, essayist and poet. After the 1919 May Fourth Movement, Lu Xun’s writing began to exert a substantial influence on Chinese literature and popular culture. Politically, Lu Xun became a radical, while maintaining his independence from both the Nationalists (Guomindang) and the Communist Party. Nonetheless, he was highly acclaimed by the Chinese government after 1949, when the People’s Republic of China was founded, and Mao Zedong himself was a lifelong admiralr of Lu Xun’s works. Mao Zedong called him “the saint of modern China”, but used his legacy selectively to promote his own political goals.
RMB (about NZ$1), or 10 RMB, or 100RMB. Isn’t that funny? So the problem has been that our school and the administrative institutions have not created a proper mechanism or incentives for teachers’ individual development in research or learning. Besides, let’s forget money, it works well if those competitive ones can be placed on a right position. I mean if they can be recognised and given an adequate arena. But that’s not what’s happening. So what’s in our mind is to fulfil the teaching load, to keep our students safe and docile and prevent them from becoming a rebel. (He becomes cautious in his words.) You can see many teachers are fond of exercising these days. The logic behind this is quite primitive: it is not that they are thinking of contributing more to the society, but that they can take another two years pay if they can live longer. (He laughs loudly at himself, again.)

For reasonable distribution of human resource capital, he has his ideal where every man can do his best:

*It is best if the government can let the right man work in the right place and everyone can enjoy his work. All walks in life should appeal to some people who believe they prove their value through their work; the cleaning for instance, it might look dirty, but it needs people who are willing to do it. What kind of people? Those who are not well educated or who haven’t credentials, and who have no guanxi. I mean, by my capability, cleaning suits me and I can get what I deserve, and I enjoy what I do. Teaching should be like that, so should all other jobs. What we have in China now is nasty discrimination against certain professions and jobs; and the reason behind is imbalanced distribution and compensation.*

But he shares that China still has a long way to go in that ideal. He shares his individual perspective on the situation of democracy and law ruling in China:

*The root of all problems lies in the problematic administration and mechanism. We should accordingly develop the laws and regulations, thus all can behave according to the laws and regulations. What Xi Jinping has stressed is worthy of acclamation: Governing the Country according to the Law.*

“Does this mean that our country is not ruled by law now?”
(Silence, and then he sighs.) *Our country, how can it be taken as ruled by law? (He hesitates and changes his tone, a bit desolate.) Law-ruling and democracy are still very far for us. Lu Xun is correct that Chinese needs a rather long period of enlightenment.* (While I am thinking what he means by quoting Lu Xun, he starts
talking, following his own thinking.) China is a society which leaped from feudalism to socialism, where exists a severe lack of a critical developmental stage, the stage of capitalism growth. Well, that is a stage where the productivity greatly advances, which involves long time proper channelling between productivity and relations of production. The ideology of law-ruling and democracy in the advanced Western culture has rooted from hundreds or longer years of capitalist development; they arose as a means constantly explored by social superstructure catering to the needs required by the prospering productivity. Democracy and legal system are the quintessence of long-term development in Western culture. It is natural that our society is having all kinds of problems as we leaped to a social stage with highly developed productivity and technology without concomitant advanced relations of production/ideology. Talking about democracy and legality, the top decision-makers made decisions, out of nice intention I believe, of pursuing that ideal, but can our ordinary people follow? Do we have a national ideology of that? You want to teach people to do (political) election, but do they know what is (political behaviour and) election? (He rambles a bit, due to too many thoughts at the same time.) Say, the Hong Kong people’s OCLP (Occupy Central with Love and Peace), you cannot say that they are out of their mind, as they are probing or testing if it is available for people to go Western democracy. But (he laughs a bit) Hong Kong, now after all, is part of China; so they will be dragged into our framework. But the central government cannot do it by force, which will go against the Western ideology.

Lu Xun, whom he admires, must have a far-reaching impact on Qin’s perspective of curriculum and social change. He sounds a bit contemptuous at the thought of excluding Lu Xun’s writing from Chinese textbooks for secondary school.

Some people did suggest that Lu Xun should go away from secondary textbooks; but thinking people, say school teachers, university professors and even young students, are strongly against that proposal. Those proposers are what we call self-styled experts. Those self-appointed curriculum reformers have never been to the classroom and have no idea as how Lu Xun has been taught in schools and what the students can absorb from their teachers. Their conclusion was drawn from nowhere; they did no research at all. (He seems to be trying hard not to be very critical.) Personally, I don’t think they really know Lu Xun. Lu Xun is first of all an ideologist, prior to a litterateur; literature is only one of his tools to save his nation. The reason that he
resorted to literature and abandoned his medical science is that he saw the significance of transforming his people’s thinking and ideology; he understood better than any others that it might be useless saving one’s nation through treating people’s physical illness. To strengthen a nation, the most substantial mission is to broaden people’s vision. At his time he took literature as his first option to fulfil his mission, which not only runs in accordance to, but also is a genuine application of Confucian educational ideas. Our ancestors’ philosophy is to transform society through education, and to Lu Xun, literature is the best tool to educate the public. Those “experts” don’t know Lu Xun, thinking that our time doesn’t need sharp critics any more while worrying studying Lu Xun can produce some inharmonious event. (He sniffs at this thinking.)
Chapter Ten: “评估/Pinggu” in China—Formal and Informal

评估/Pinggu is the Chinese word for “assessment”, “appraisal”, “audit”, “evaluation” and “inspection”. I choose to use pinggu because “inspection” seems appropriate to stand for the concept of ‘programme evaluation’ in the Chinese context, although under the name of ‘evaluation’. When ‘evaluation’ is evoked in Western academic contexts, there arise conversations on “quality”, “criteria”, “standard” and “judgement”, and the public discourse on this topic can be dynamic (Kushner, 2017, in press).

Bear in mind that evaluation investigates the enactment of ideas, beliefs and values (i.e. policy) in the forms of social action to which they give rise so that they may be reviewed in the light of their effects. Its focus is the quality of provision and it should not be confused with assessment or appraisal which are concerned with the performance of people. Assessment is about the achievements, needs and potential of students whilst appraisal serves a parallel function with respect to employees. Assessment and appraisal data may constitute part of the evidence assembled by an evaluation but only in so far as they cast light on the merits of the provision from which they arise. In some cases such data may tell us how effective a programme is in achieving its objectives but nothing about the costs, the side effects, the unanticipated or unintended outcomes, or the worth of the objectives themselves. Nor should you confuse evaluation with monitoring or audit, both of which are system maintenance procedures. Monitoring is a surveillance instrument that provides regular standardised information on the level of functioning of a given system. It may be carried out by direct inspection or indirectly by performance indicators or by a combination of the two. Audit, on the other hand, is a regular or occasional check on the adequacy and integrity of internal accounting procedures. (MacDonald, Editor (n.d.) Coming to Terms with Research, Centre for Applied Research in Education)

For at least 60 years Western scholars have been exploring issues such as: Where should the evaluator look for the quality of an educational programme? Who should have the power and eligibility to set the criteria for judgements of educational quality, why and how? How can social justice, equality and equity be promoted through quality evaluation? How can social change be perceived through programme evaluation? This indicates a mature discourse
(Elliott & Kushner, 2007). In China, evaluation as a discrete discipline is younger and newer, though the practice occurs. School inspection affects our case study school just as it does schools across the world, and with its own particular flavour.

10.1. The Language of ‘Evaluation’ in the Chinese Local Context

Given the gulf between the concept of evaluation in Western literature and that of the Chinese context, I feel awkward sharing with my respondents the fact that my research is an evaluative inquiry seeking to examine one of the root questions of educational evaluation: what should be considered as ‘quality’ in schooling, and who should have the power to set the criteria. However, I did try to probe local understanding and interpretations of ‘evaluation’. Below is a casual conversation I had with one of the teachers on the concept of ‘evaluation’. The italicised text is from the teacher.

“I heard that in Western countries it has been common that research institutions such as universities can have some cooperation from schools, by tradition, to do educational research, and it might be normal that scholars can evaluate schools. How about us? Do we have that climate?”

We, the teachers, are the target to be assessed for whether we are qualified as a teaching staff. This is part of the overall evaluation of a school, which requires mountains of files and documentation. A teacher can usually be evaluated for the required quality for teaching through their educational credentials, capability and teaching ability.

“Who can do this?”

Only the educational department of course. The local Bureau of Education (municipal level) and the Office of Education (provincial level).

“Do you mean that the evaluator must be from the superior administrative institution?”

Definitely.

“So the evaluation cannot be conducted by any level of division?”

What kind of level of division?

“Like some other schools, or the students, or the parents, or scholars?”

(Pause, to think) You are talking about comments, not evaluation. Our school cannot be evaluated together with J Middle School because we are in a town level while they are in a district level. J Middle School cannot be evaluated together with H Middle School because H Middle School is in municipal level. It is fair that we are evaluated
in the group of N and O secondary schools; we belong to the same level; otherwise by what standard or reason that one can draw his conclusion that that school is better while this is not or that schooling is stronger than this one. It is the same that I am not eligible to evaluate my colleagues. All evaluations generate certain conclusions, which should be supported by various evidence/data. So evaluations cannot be done by people of the same level; but comments are fine. You, for example, cannot evaluate our school, as you do not have the administrative and political power. But you can comment; the parents can comment on you every day; the students can comment on you any time they feel like it; the colleagues are commenting behind you all the time. (Laugh) And a stranger may comment at the sight of you.

Evaluation, that is to say, is affirmative of hierarchy and underpinned by hierarchical authority.

10.2. A Cold Gust for Schooling Equality and Quality in M School

December in M City is early winter, when leaves fall, but fallen leaves are not allowed to stay on campus of M School ground prior to the National Evaluation of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (NEBDCE) on 24 December 2015. During the two weeks prior, I have seen teams from different classes working in turn, sometimes during class time, to keep the ground clear of any leaves and litter. I am told it is for the upcoming NEBDCE visitation.

10.2.1. Faculty meeting in preparation for the NEBDCE

17 December 2014

On the afternoon of 17 December, I hear in the office that there will be a faculty meeting of the whole school at 5 p.m. The meeting is about receiving the NEBDCE. I take it as a window to see how a programme evaluation is conducted in China, as this meeting may shed light on how frontline staff prepare for the evaluation.

Motivated, I finish collecting my things five minutes before 5 p.m. and get ready to follow the teachers for the faculty meeting. But then I notice something. For the teachers, some of them are still working on marking their students’ homework, while some others are having tea, and others are chatting. The meeting must be an extra burden in their workload and office hours.

I approach Yu: “Shall we go?”

He replies:
Later. Better that we wait here. If we go now, we are waiting there in the meeting room.

Several minutes later, people start heading for the assembly hall in the left-hand side of the ground floor in the Third Teaching Building. I join, following Yu. We choose to sit in a middle area and wait for others to settle down.

At the entrance stands the Dean of teaching affairs, handing out some printed manuscripts on A3 paper. Teachers keep coming. They are required to sign in an A4-sized exercise book which is laid on a small table close to the gate, and there is a queue for it. Some choose to sign in after the meeting in order not to wait in the queue. At the front of the hall is a stage, with a long table in the centre, with five chairs. Three principals sit there, Principal Zhang in the middle with a microphone. A man, probably from the Principal’s office, comes and passes several bottles of water to the top school leaders. Below, in the first line of the audience area, sit the middle level school leaders, and the seats close to them are sparsely filled. The teachers, who have taught two or three classes and stayed for about six hours in the office as required, sit chatting in low voices, or checking their mobiles, or closing their eyes for a short rest.

At around 5:15 p.m. Principal Zhang asks for quiet and starts his talk. Several minutes later I realise that he is actually reading a document verbatim. Knowing that I want to have the document for my research, Yu gives his to me. The Principal reads for about 40 minutes and one of the Deputy Principals emphasises and repeats the accountability system involved for the receiving task. No questions are raised, and no discussion seems necessary, since very specific details for the reception job have been well defined and assigned to named personnel. The meeting ends at around 6 p.m.

10.2.2. Plan for receiving the NEBDCE

A quick look at the document issued at the faculty meeting informs me of the leader’s decision to suddenly change the normal daily schooling time in M School: the school decides to shorten the schooling time, allowing for the junior section to pass the inspection, because there is a written regulation that the secondary school students should not be kept in the school for more than seven hours per day.

The name of the document from the faculty meeting is Plan for Receiving the National Inspection of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education, referred to here as ‘the Plan’. Before I explain the details in the Plan, let us first become familiar with NEBDCE. The
concept is introduced as follows in Balanced Development of Compulsory Education: Cornerstone of Education Equity (Tian, You, Run, Xiao, Zhao, & Xie, 2007):

Basically, more resources will be allocated to economically challenged areas in order to reduce the discrepancies of education quality between different regions so that each citizen can have access to a decent education. The fundamental goal of education development is to facilitate a balanced development. In this sense, the balanced development of compulsory education is the cornerstone of the realization of education equity. (Tian et al. 2007, p. 469)

This drives the inspection system and aims to make local governments accountable for the disparity between schools. Local governmental officers can take as one of their achievements, in order to boost their career path, having been successfully inspected by the superior administrative institution. In this case, to receive the inspection can be made a mission for the school staff.

It is in this context that all the school staff in M City have been engaged in preparing for the upcoming NEBDCE in December 2014. M Secondary School had been unofficially identified as a possible inspection spot, hence the faculty meeting. But it turns out to be misinformation. Another secondary school in the same district receives the inspection.

Now let us turn to the Plan. The Plan runs to five pages of A3-sized paper, and my translation turns out to be over 5000 words in English. It consists of three parts:

I. Work Plan for accepting the evaluative inspection for Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (BDCE)
II. Basic Knowledge for Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (BDCE)
III. Yingzhi Yinghui/Must-knows for the Teachers and Students

As we will see, this is an authoritarian instrument which leaves little room for negotiation and proposes penalties for non-compliance. It is highly detailed concerning preparation and compliance. Nonetheless, as we examine its provisions, we see a mixture of values being expressed, not least, an overriding concern for equality of educational opportunity, and for the engagement of parents. Alongside punitive and low-trust accountability for schools and teachers is a progressive view of pedagogy emphasising “autonomy”, “co-operation” and “inquiry”. This document is complex and contradictory.

Part I has six sections: Guiding Ideology, General Objectives, Steering Group, Reception Centre and the Visiting Route, Remediation Action, and Work Requirement. Within the
Steering Group, there are diverse roles for welcoming the inspection leader: the Principal assumes Group leadership, with the four Deputy Principals, the associate group leaders and the middle level school leaders as the Group members. Four working teams are under the steering group: Reception Team, Archival Data Team, On-Site Management Team, Panel Discussion and Questionnaire Team. This guarantees that every area on campus is covered by named personnel.

The head teacher’s job is described at the end of the Steering Group section, as follows:

*The head teachers are supposed to maintain the tidiness of the classrooms, the specific-function classrooms and the respective public areas. No hygienic blind spot is allowed, no cigarette end, litter nor cobweb. Besides, no footprint should stay on the wall. All the window glasses and doors in the classrooms and offices should be carefully cleaned. A rich classroom culture is expected to be displayed; abundant reading materials are expected in the reading corner in each classroom. The learning of the students should be well organised and the students’ manners during the break should be civilised.*

The Remedial Action section makes clear what can be the foci in the inspection, and I choose the first two items as examples:

1. *The array of the archives and documents required should be further checked to achieve the standard demanded. To be specific, the relevant schooling documents, for example the forms for reporting statistics, statements and reports, must be made closely in line with the index requirements. All the supporting materials recommended by the index requirements must be detailed and reliable (to make supplement or cancellation where necessary). The entire index must be achieved. The whole faculty should take it obligatory that the school pass the evaluation: no major accident should occur; the schooling culture should be well established; trees on campus should be planted if needed; mechanism for effective communication between the teaching staff inter and intra schools should be set up and consummated.*

2. *Publicising the concept of “balanced development of compulsory education” should be of high efficacy. The satisfaction index is a critical reference for the national evaluative inspection, but currently a good few people have not acquired a deep understanding towards this programme, thereby raising objections to a school’s work. To uplift the public satisfaction, therefore, it has been imperative to achieve the required index for successfully passing the national evaluative inspection. So all*
possible opportunities should be efficiently used: the teachers should be trained at the faculty meeting; a presentation should be made to the parents at the parents’ meeting; the students should be inculcated on occasions of all kinds of assemblies.

Items 2, 3 and 4 under the Work Requirement, clearly state a reward and punishment system for the job:

2. To clarify the accountability mechanism... a rewards and punishments mechanism will be established, thus individual teachers’ performance here can be checked. This accountability will be listed into the measures to process the teachers’ professional assessment, annual appraisal and performance assessment.

3...Consequently an accountability system has been clarified that it is the one who takes charge who carries the accountability. Therefore any negligence will be investigated; the person in charged will take the blame in addition to taking effective corrective actions.

4. To set up a reporting system. From December 2014, the sub-group leaders will need to report, every two days, to the steering group on the progress of the preparation job.

There are many four-word jargon-filled slogans in the Plan and here is one extract to illustrate:

A strong atmosphere for “accepting the evaluative inspection” should be created: to aim high; to progress following the trend; to consolidate both the ideology and daily practice; to advance gradually but steadily; to passionately meet the upcoming challenges.

Part II aims to popularise the basic knowledge for Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (BDCE). Here are the essentials of BDCE:

Being a concept of development, “balanced education” is a new move to solve practical issues in education, which is the cornerstone of a harmonious society with educational equality. The move embodies three layers of implication: first, it requires to issue more favourable policies for disadvantaged schools in remote and isolated regions when allocating educational resources; second, more concern should be given to the relatively vulnerable schools in the same region to reach intra-regional balance; third, much attention should be attached to the underprivileged groups to improve balance among different social groups. Its ultimate target is to obtain
equality in education through fairly distributing educational resources, providing a
decent schooling for every child and effectively running every school.

When assessing/evaluating, there is always the thorny problem of deriving standards and
criteria. For example, what can be considered as an ‘educational resource’ and as ‘school
discrepancies’, and how are these to be measured? But when it is through an authoritarian
mechanism deploying a marking system, the ‘thorny problems’ become algorithms. Here are
two examples from the Plan:

*The intra-school discrepancies, which are mainly comprised by correlation
coefficients, will be reckoned deploying the following 8 items in index:*

1. the usable floor area (building or multiple lifts) per students for schooling;
2. sports area per student;
3. the investment in teaching instrument and equipment per student;
4. the number of computers per 100 student;
5. the number of library book per student;
6. teacher-student ratios;
7. the number of the teachers holding professional certificate superior to the
required level;
8. the number of the teachers holding middle and senior professional titles.

*The evaluative standard for rudimentary balanced education:*

* a correlation coefficient less than 0.65 and 0.55 respective for the primary and
secondary schools.

... 

*Seventeen items in the following four aspects compose the index for the assessment of
the performance by the local government in forwarding a balanced education:*

1. the entry opportunity for compulsory schooling;
2. the guarantee mechanism;
3. the teaching staff;
4. quality and management.

*The total score is 100 with each of the 17 items for assessment granted certain scores;
those who earn a score above 85 are up to par. Taking into account of the
discrepancies among different provinces, it is advisable that more items can be added
to the above-mentioned assessment index of the local governmental performance.*
When it comes to the characteristics of this inspection under the name of evaluation, people are told:

Compared to the past supervision and evaluation mechanism, this one manifests the following vantage points, summed up as three innovations: a heightened scientficity; strong reliability; public engagement.

Further insight into the values base of this Plan, and awareness of contextual factors, are revealed in some of the key responsibilities of the local government for BDCE:

1. To ensure that no funds allocated by the superior government for educational transformation should not be intercepted or misappropriated, at least no more than 50%.
2. To guarantee a timely payment for the teaching staff.
3. To foster a positive social change for respecting the teacher and his teaching.

There is a sense that such a command-and-control approach to regulating schools generates an intensifying need for more regulation. The inspection system is aware of organisational ‘game-playing’ and addresses this with further compliance indicators: here, under the title “What are the five requirements proposed by the Ministry of Education to ‘alleviate the burdens’ on schooling”:

1. .... It is not allowed to use admission rate as the only parameter for measuring the quality of school management.
2. ... No school entry assessment, say recruitment and selection tests, is allowed for at the stage of compulsory education.
3. To precisely and persistently implement the national curriculum scheme. It is not allowed to randomly decrease or increase the courses, or adjust the course difficulty or teaching hour.
4. To develop abundant extra-curriculum activities. It is not allowed to arrange any make-up lessons on weekends and holidays.
5. To give an overall assessment of student’s all-round development. It is not allowed to queue the students by test score.

The title of Part III, 应知应会 / Yingzhi Yinghui (Must-knows) for the Teachers and Students, connotes that rote learning the information provided is obligatory. I pick up the following, which offers a view of school based curriculum reform.
III. What is postulated by The Outline for the Curricula Reform for Basic Education to conduct the curriculum management? What are the ‘three-dimensional objectives’? What does the pedagogy advocate?

1. Curriculum management: after the new curriculum reform, the situation of an unduly centralised management in curriculum in our country has been ameliorated; this amelioration has been achieved through joint or shared accountability among the three levels of administration: national, local and school-based.

2. ‘Three-dimensional objectives’: knowledge and techniques; process and methods; emotion, attitude and values.


VI. What has been accomplished by the school to promote the new curriculum reform and implement quality oriented education?

1. The school endeavours to implement the new curriculum plan through opening all the courses proposed and running the courses according to the advised length; the school has never randomly changed the difficulty level of the curriculum or the teaching syllabus.

2. The students are kept in school for a time less than 7 hours; time for night study is less than 2 classes.

3. The time for written homework for the primary and (?) secondary school students has been reduced to less than 1.5 and 2 hours respectively. For the hours of sleep, it should be no less than 9 and 8 hours respectively for the junior and senior middle school students.

4. There is no class stratification and streaming.

5. To guarantee more than one hour’s sports time, the students are expected to have the Big Break time.

6. No teaching should be organised under the name of “补差提优 / bucha tiyou” during holidays and weekends. (bucha: to help the slow learners to improve; tiyou: to help the fast learners to perform better).

(The underlined, bold and the bracketed words are kept intact in the translation.)

Here, then, is a confusing mix of authoritarian control and liberal educational values. Of course, it is to be remembered that class sizes in this particular school are average, and this,
itself, would make it attractive for any school to stratify the student population. Managing mixed-ability classes of such a size is a great challenge, even without the encouragement for student autonomy and for inquiry-based teaching. Here we see one of the fundamental dilemmas for China’s schooling: reconciling educational quality with the sheer throughput of students.

10.2.3. A round robin proposal
At the end of the Plan is a new schedule made for the inspection. It is this change that leads to the presentation of a round robin proposal.

It happens on 18 December 2014, when we are back in the Teachers’ Office the following day after the faculty meeting. People do not talk about the faculty meeting until late afternoon when most of them have finished their daily teaching and can have a break. Mr Qin, a teacher of Chinese of Year 10, starts the conversation about the sudden change of prescribed schooling hours for the junior section. Most teachers spontaneously respond on the unnecessarily longer hours for the senior section and hence their longer working and office hours. The conversation starts between two male teachers, while they go on with their work at hand:

Teacher A:

I should think about applying to be shifted to teach in the junior section next semester.
Less pressure. And now less hours.

Teacher B (laughing and teasing):
Naïve! You think you are eligible to do that? Why don’t you think about trying to be the librarian with Bianzhi?

Teacher A (laughing too and teasing in return):
Sounds like you could do. Haven’t you tried last year? Any luck?

Teacher B:
I wish!

Then they join in the talk of initiating the proposal. After some complaints they agree to present to the school leader a round robin proposal to have the same schooling hours as the junior section. Qin accommodates his colleagues’ wishes when he is recommended as the developer.
At the end of their discussion, I join and ask Qin: “Aren’t you afraid of ‘穿小鞋/Chuan Xiao Xie?’ (‘being given tight shoes to wear’, which is often used to describe the worst situation an employee can experience as a result of causing trouble for their employer.)

Qin laughs at my word, while two other female teachers comment, joining his laughter:

*He is not. It is not his first time.*

Qin adds:

*I have been accustomed to that; so good at that that I cannot feel myself once they don’t give me tight shoes.*

I ask, tentatively, whether I could have a look at the proposal when Qin finishes, and he gives his assent. And he does send the proposal by email the next day. Qin’s willingness to offer collaboration in my research encourages me to have him as representative of the teacher’s voice. Here is Qin’s proposal.

**Advice on Adjusting the Schooling Hours for the Senior Section in Our School**

Recently we had our faculty meeting of the whole school to actively prepare for the smooth passage of NEBDCE (2013-2014). At the meeting it was announced that our school is to adjust schooling hours for the junior section to strictly implement the provincial educational regulations, which means the students from the junior section in our school will stay in the school no longer than seven hours per weekday. This move has won acclaim from the whole faculty, as it shows our resolution that we run our schooling affairs according to law, that we carry forward quality oriented education and that we strive to take steps to follow the guiding ideology in developing balanced education. The senior section in our school, however, has not seen any change in this respect; hence we propose the following advice through a rich discussion:

I. The advice is that the senior section should keep the same pace with the junior one and take an adjustment in school hours.

II. Suggestions:

1. Running a high school like ours is like playing chess, which means there should be coherent strategy, unified assessment standard and equal treatment to all faculty staff.
2. Currently the whole nation has been endeavouring to nurture the ethos advocated by *The Outline for Educational Reform and Development*, which attaches great importance to quality oriented education. One of the foci of quality oriented
education is the growth of students’ personality and creativity. To fulfil this mission, it is advisable that our school allow the students free time as much as possible to develop themselves all round and to manage their learning independently. They need more free time to develop their own hobbies and interests, to study on their own, to internalise what they learn from classroom teaching, and to finish their homework independently.

3. The true picture in our school is that the senior section (year 7-year 9) has not been separated from the junior section (year 10-year 12); if the junior section gets dismissed earlier, therefore, the classes for the senior section students would be terribly distracted. The students just cannot be focused and attentive.

4. Another fact is that since the bulk in year 10 and year 11 have joined all kinds of clubs and associations, the eighth class should be for their activities. So with the changing number and high mobility of the students, it has been almost impossible to teach and manage the class effectively.

5. Though the pressure in the short term, for college admission will not fall heavily on students from year 10 and year 11, the students will consequently lose the opportunity to become independent in their learning, and their potential spurt for the gaokao, if their time is totally occupied with assignments from the teachers.

6. It has been proved that our past achievement in teaching has never been made through extended schooling hours. For example, for 2014 gaokao, we created record breaking high college admission rates without any weekend and holiday extra-class teaching.

7. If the school for the senior section ends at 5:30 p.m. in the afternoon, the unforeseeable dangers will increase for the students having a dark route back home, especially in winter time. Such a long teaching schedule will deprive the students of their sports exercise time on campus.

8. Contrasted with other neighbouring schools, many end their schooling at 4:40 without the eighth class.

Please can the school leaders give the above advice and suggestions some consideration!

2014-12-18 (year and date)

Signature from the teaching staff in the senior section of the school:
There is no response to this proposal.

10.3. Quantified Youth

According to quantised management, dormitory living and hygiene conditions, morality, classroom discipline and conduct, and academic achievements will all influence a student’s assessment; furthermore, the performance evaluation of a class teacher and course teacher are based on the assessments of their students. This results in teachers having to work as hard as they possibly can. The attitude of teachers will ultimately influence their students, and the stress for students to do well on the assessment is intensified by teachers who also need to do well.

With the aid of documents collected, this section aims to demonstrate how school life in China is quantified. First come quantified dormitory behaviours.

10.3.1. Quantified dormitory behaviour

In the Lounge of the First Teaching Building, at the corner of the bulletin board on the wall opposite to the photos of good students, a form entitled M Middle School Dormitory Inspection Records is displayed (see Figure 12).

Figure 12. Dormitory Inspection Records, from the bulletin board on the wall of the Lounge. The document is of text-book sized paper and of low quality. The paper has to be cheap, as it is needed in large numbers. Under the title is a row for headings relating to time: year, month, date, the number of semester week, week date, and the name of the managing staff, which is always empty. There are seven rows in the form denoting the school year, the dorm room
number, the name of the student, the deduction point of absence for boarding, of rule-violation (for sanitation, for disorder in placement of personal belongings). Judging by the date, the inspection is happening on a daily basis.

Causes for the deduction of points for rule-violation are listed:

- 5 kicking shuttlecock and shouting during the nap time and violate the rules severely
- 2 talking and not sleeping on time at noon
- 2 shouting on the floor after lights out
- 3 singing in the dorm room after lights out
- 2 shouting in the dorm room after lights out
- 2 playing mobile at 23:15 in the night
- 3 throwing rubbish to the back of the Dorm Building
- 3 brushing teeth in the corridor after lights out
- 3 coming out late in the morning, at 7:37
- 2 littering in the dorm at noon time

The deduction of points seems coherent in relation to the data listed in another Excel form, on A4 paper, in the other corner in the board: score for the fortnightly competition for the honorary title of the Civil Classroom.

Now let us look at how classroom behaviours are quantified.

10.3.2. Quantified morality and conduct

The form entitled Morality and Conduct Assessment of Class 6 is displayed on the back wall of Class 6, Year 10. The data cover the first term between 2014 and 2015. The student number in the class, student’s name, base score, added scores, subtracted scores, the final score and note are the titles for the seven columns (see Figure 13).
Figure 13. Morality and Conduct Assessment Form, displayed on the back wall of Class 6, Year 10.

From the note explaining why there are added and subtracted scores for the individual students, it is clear what will cause a decrease in score:

- Talking in class time
- Sleeping in class time
- Being late for class
- Being absent
- Reading novels in class time
- Skipping homework
- Violation of class discipline

And what can increase scores:

- Being a class cadre
- Winning the title for the Class of Civilisation
- Helping in building the class culture
- Helping host class activities
- Helping design class uniform
- No violation against classroom discipline

This may tell, to a certain extent, why the students are reticent and inactive during class time.
10.3.3. Schooling report

In M Secondary School, the class has fortnightly tests and monthly exams, on average, in addition to the mid-term and final examinations. This excludes Year 12 classes, who have a more concentrated training. The school holds Parents-Teacher meetings twice a year, immediately after the mid-term examination in each term. Several painstakingly prepared Excel forms are produced following each monthly examination, and they show meticulous statistical data for each class, each subject and each student. Figure 14 presents data selected from the portfolio from the Parents-Teacher meeting for Class 6.

The form shows class rank in the second monthly examination from 20-22 December 2014. There are six Year 10 classes, and the form lists their rank in each subject and their final rank. The first two classes are the so-called good class.

![Image of Excel form showing class rank](image.png)

*Figure 14.* One of the documents collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting, showing class rank in the second monthly examination.

Another document collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting is an example of the statistical analysis of the performance of each class in each subject (see Figure 15). It tells the rank, the progress (rise or fall) in the rank, the top score, the lowest and the average score, the passing rate and the excellence rate.
Figure 15. Form showing statistical analysis of the examination performance of each class in Year 10.

The Schooling Report for Class 6 (see Figure 16) lists the student’s name, their subject score, the total score, the increased or decreased scores contrasted with the last exam score respective of the total and each subject score, the place of that score in the class and in the
whole year, how many places this score has progressed or declined in the class and in the whole year. In the portfolio there are also Schooling Reports for the other five classes.
**Figure 16.** Form showing statistical analysis of the examination performance of each student in Class 6, Year 10.
A further document collected from the Parents-Teacher meeting is the individually personalised report (see Figure 17), which shows the individual’s name and class number, the head teacher’s name and mobile, followed by the individual’s test score for entering the M School, the scores of the first and second monthly examination and other rankings.

Figure 17. One student’s test scores and rankings from Class 6, Year 10.

10.4. The ‘Winners’ and ‘Losers’

A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School is the title of the 23-slide PowerPoint Mr Yu shares with me for my research. It is this that he uses to educate both C6 at the class meeting and the parents at the Parents-Teacher meeting. I include this because it must have been widely deployed by Chinese teachers as a means to inspire their students, very likely parents too, since it is adapted from a popular blog (author unknown\textsuperscript{10}). The PowerPoint has been carefully made and is imbued with vivid images and symbols.

It first projects an image of ‘poor’ students: school uniform, seemingly weird long hair, smoking, hanging out in small group, not reading, playing on their mobiles.

\textsuperscript{10}the blog address:
http://mt.sohu.com/20150418/n411485809.shtml
http://wenku.baidu.com/link?url=7isYvEckglITU0CHX-6QeO3hzeEWfIuW-y8eq1G-DJiuvZLCHwgi5zxBglduZnCBkV63WJPFQKyU10ELXCWlfOyo4FxcNSgLekJmOQisZpeO
This is directly linked to the image of the “loser” or “failure”. By “loser” or “failure”, in China, this refers to those diligent factory workers: sitting in uniform, working in straight lines, and paid by piecework (see Figure 19). For me, it implies a pathetic way of life I once read about—a life of 12 hours’ work every day, with no time for anything but survival.

Figure 18. Slide depicting “poor” students, from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

Figure 19. Factory workers linked to the image of ‘loser’, from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.
Or a figure in a dense steel jungle in a construction site, busy working with a hammer, in simplistic security attire, which is not clean.

*Figure 20. Workers in a construction site, from the PowerPoint entitled A Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.*

Then the image of the parents, who are hardworking, but in my eyes still wrongly loathed and downtrodden in Chinese society: the shirtless male manual workers sitting, crowded together, to watch a DVD on a DVD player during their leisure time, with probably two of the wives staying in one corner (see Figure 21). The dirt floor, the fans, the unwashed dishes on the table, and rubbish under the table, the inferior bedding, all indicate shabby and inhumane living conditions. This is a typical image of the ‘floating population’. And this is used to indicate a future life of those who do not study hard at school, or who study hard but without attaining competitive achievement.
For the opposite, ‘good’ student and ‘successful life’ has been iconised, too (see Figure 22). The ‘good’ student is represented by a teenage girl in neat school uniform holding a book reading. And the “successful/happy life” is represented by young people and implies company/office life: the male in a Western suit, tie and leather shoes; the female in a white-collared blouse, suit and high-heeled shoes, striding in a sunny and spacious corridor of a modern office building.
Figure 22. A depiction of ‘winners’ walking in an office building, from the PowerPoint entitled Letter to Those Unwilling to Study Hard at School.

The last slide comes as the conclusion to all the previous contrasts (this is not an interpretation, but translation of the slide content):

- You live in a society full of fierce competition and only very few can win out through studying hard and/or working hard.
- To those who harbour the thinking that youth is for rebellion, you had better to be reminded that you live in China, not America or Europe.
- The reality in China is that people believe in the law of the jungle and the survival of the fittest.
- The cost for a merry-seeking youth is life-long low status in the bottom of our society.

I must have failed to hide my agitation, and raised my concern to Mr Yu: “What about teaching people to respect those manual labourers?”

He looks at me and seriously asks:

Well, if you can, tell me, when have you seen those people treated respectfully? What is the consequence if we encourage our students to go after that style of life? What options do you think we, the classroom teacher can have, but to push our students to
work harder? Do they have other options? We have to be realistic and they have to face this reality in our society.

It is clear what is happening here. The teacher, with good intentions, is preparing children for a highly stratified socio-economic future. A casualty is self-respect for the young people in Class 6, since many of these children will not end up in a wealthy office jobs, and an unjust humiliation for some of the parents, as several fathers, as I later find out from the class files, are working on construction sites as ‘floating labour’, and some mothers as factory workers.

This event can be one of many in this field work endorsing that the concept of “praxis” is morally informed action (Reid 1978; Kemmis, & Smith, 2008; Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer, & Bristol, 2013). This interpretation requires clarifying the concept of “praxis”, the purpose of education, and morality.

Different from people’s daily routine practice, praxis is distinguished as another kind of action: practical action taken in response to the particular circumstances surrounding “uncertain practical questions” (Reid 1978, p 42). In the form “what should I do now/next?”, the kind of action people take in these circumstances is not a kind of rule-following, or producing an outcome of a kind that is known in advance. It is rather an action whose consequences are more or less indeterminate, but that can be evaluated only in the light of their consequences—in terms of how things actually turn out. The purpose of education here is to prepare people to live well in a world worth living in (Kemmis, & Smith, 2008, p.4). Moral decision here refers to an individual’s own principles regarding right and wrong.

The pedagogical move noted here by the head teacher is a morally committed educational praxis: He well understands the consequence of his using the PowerPoint at the parents-teacher meeting, but because of his identity of teacher and the professional morality out of this identity, he still chooses to educate this way. Morally he believes this is the best he could do for his students.
Section Three: Analysis and Discussion

I made claim at the beginning of the thesis that this research is a learning journey to see how well the Western theories, both substantive and methodological, can work in the Chinese context. I aimed to make a contribution not just to the existing repository of case studies, but also to the knowledge of the status quo of evaluative investigation in contemporary China. This section focuses on the data analysis, aiming to explore what the case studied so far can be and what can be theorised from the case.

Generally speaking, there are three key analytical approaches: (i) the application of a pre-existing theoretical work; (ii) the use of coding operations as in Grounded Theory; and (iii) an issues based approach. The first approach is theory driven: the data analysis is led by theory, an existing one, derived elsewhere and probably favoured by the researcher. The second approach may involve what Swedberg calls “abduction”—trawling the data in search of patterns revealing something about the nature of the reality being researched. It is the third approach, the issue-based analytical framework that is applied here. This does not mean that literature-based theories will be ignored; they are an important intellectual resource. But “the case study attends to the idiosyncratic more than to the pervasive” (Stake, 1978, p. 6), and the landscape and learning journey of this case study is inevitably different and unique: out of the nature of this research and research questions, the data collected are experience centred and practice-oriented. This entails analysis led by practical issues from the fieldwork—issues raised by the students, parents, various levels of schooling staff, and the researcher self. Once the issues are recognised, relative theoretical literature will be selected to approximate the understanding.

This section, led by fieldwork data, targets at the two research themes: hidden curriculum in Chinese schooling and the way to see the hidden.
Chapter Eleven: Schooling and State Will in China—A Case of Hidden Curriculum

This chapter, led by several problems that emerged from the fieldwork data, focuses on Chinese hidden curriculum.


Giroux believes that at the heart of the social educational encounter is a hidden curriculum whose values shape and influence practically every aspect of the student’s educational experience. However, from the neo-Marxist perspective, this should not suggest that the hidden curriculum is so powerful that there is little hope for educational reform. Instead, the hidden curriculum should be seen not as an impassable boundary, but as providing a possible direction for focusing educational change (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 31). Kentli summarises by saying that “the hidden curriculum as a socialization of schooling can be identified by the social interactions within an environment. Thus, it is in process at all times, and serves to transmit tacit messages to students about values, attitudes and principles” (2009, p. 88).

Hidden curriculum, together with ‘the overt curriculum’ and ‘the fundamental perspectives’, therefore, are endorsed by Michael Apple as the top basic elements in schooling that must be examined to understand how schools work in the complex process of the economic and cultural reproduction of social life (2012, p. 18). The major value of the notion of hidden curricula is that it calls attention to aspects of schooling that today are still only vaguely recognised and remain largely unexamined, particularly the schools’ pedagogical, institutional and social environments and their interrelations.

Implicit in this analysis of the school and classroom as a socialising agent is an important pedagogical premise. The premise has been critical in so far as stating that “any curriculum designed to introduce positive changes in classrooms will fail, unless such a proposal is
rooted in an understanding of those socio-political forces that strongly influence the very texture of day-to-day classroom pedagogical practices” (Giroux & Penna, 1979, p. 26).

Yet, hidden curriculum has not been adequately illuminated by social studies and educators, probably because “the usefulness of the concepts of hidden curriculum as a vehicle for criticism depends in part on a degree of amorphousness that precludes close scrutiny” (Cornbleth, 1984, p. 29). The phenomena referred to as constituting the hidden curriculum are tacit in so far as their presence is implied and often taken for granted rather than directly acknowledged and examined; these phenomena also appear to be both complex and changing, with varying features and messages, academic and social, across time and place.

11.1. The Left-behind and Schooling enrolment Policy

At that time when I was not together with them (the parents), I was able to do well in schooling; I mean I can have good test scores. But they didn’t seem content, bugging me that what’s the use of good scores if a girl is not obedient enough. (She sobs.)

Later my test scores are not as good as before and they start telling me that they see nothing good in me, or I am good for nothing. (Jiao, Chapter Eight)

This is Jiao, a 17-year-old female student who was able to meet her parents only once a year before she was 12 years old. Her story brought to life the concept of ‘left-behind children’. I had heard about the group known as left-behind children before, but it was only after hearing Jiao that I came to know that they do exist and that they exist all around me. How many left-behind children are there in China? Why do their parents choose to leave them behind? How does it happen that test scores can determine a child’s value in a parent’s eyes? What has this to do with schooling?

11.1.1. Hukou and the left-behind

Jiao’s image drove me to delve into the world of this special group in China: the left-behind children (LBC). I was soon shocked: it is reported in 2015 by the All-China Women’s Federation, a Communist Party advocacy group, that approximately 61 million Chinese children cannot or have not seen one or both parents for at least three months.

This situation requires some background. During the initial period of reform and opening up in modern China, a time when the society was in proletarian egalitarianism but when there was a shortage of materials, the government adopted some ‘tilted policies’ to enable certain regions to become prosperous, on the assumption that the prosperity for the rest would follow in time (Cai, 2011). It is with the emergence of an imbalanced economic landscape that
domestic migration, also known as the ‘floating population’ (FP), occurs in as much a market-based as a state-directed process. That is, migration streams are largely driven by economic motives as well as by a growing need for cheap labour (Bonacich, 1972; Portes & DeWind, 2004). FP has fuelled China’s economic boom and in the meantime has also forced a re-drawing of China’s social landscape: due to the state-sponsored hukou system (see 5.2.1. Hukou system in page 58 or glossary number 10), the FP often, upon their arrival in cities, exist as undocumented persons and suffer from social and economic discrimination (Meng, 2004).

Hukou stands out conspicuously in this situation. Before the 1990s, hukou, this institutionalised barrier for social mobility, had received scant mention in the literature. The last two decades have seen increasing attention from scholars towards this system and the central government’s efforts to reform. Kam Wing Chan (1994, 1999, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012) has argued that the hukou system was not designed mainly as a system to block rural-urban migration, as commonly portrayed in the Western literature; instead, it was part of a larger economic and political system set up to serve multiple state interests. It functions well for China’s divisive dualistic socio-economic structure and the country’s two classes of citizenship, for it effectively circumscribed the peasantry’s economic, social and political opportunities and rights, creating a massive pool of low-cost rural labour tied to land of very little market value (Qin, 2005; Kelly, 2008) through effectively reinforcing a kind of regional apartheid (Goodkind & West, 2002). To be specific, under this system, some 700-800 million people are in effect treated as second-class citizens, deprived of the opportunity to settle legally in cities and deprived of access to most of the basic welfare and state-provided services enjoyed by regular urban residents.

Consequently, most of the FP remain crammed into dormitories where children are not allowed (Chan, 2012). Many FP parents believe they are fulfilling their duty to raise their family’s standard of living. It is common, therefore, for both parents to leave home together, as they can save faster and there are ample jobs in the city (Browne, 2014, January 17).

In relation to the living conditions of the LBC, I was stunned by the social media revelation of a number of tragedies befalling the LBC: One chilly night in late 2012, in a village near Bijie, five left-behind boys clambered into a large bin, lit a fire and closed the lid for warmth. A rubbish picker found their bodies the next morning; they died of carbon monoxide poisoning. In 2013, a spate of sex abuse cases involving LBC shocked China. No fewer than
eight cases of sex abuse in schools were exposed within a span of twenty days, causing alarm among parents and anger to be voiced on social media (Wu, 2013, 12 August; Davison, 2015). Leaving a note behind, thought to be to his parents, which read “Thanks for your kindness. I know you mean well for us, but we should go now. Death had been my dream for years”, a 12-year-old boy swigged from a bottle of pesticide and handed it to his sisters, aged five, eight and nine, who did the same (Tang, bbc.com, 2015, 11 June; June 11; news.youth.cn, 2015, June 11th; news.sina.com.cn, 2015, Jun 11th; Hou, 2015, August 06; Xia, 2015, August 3; Davison, 2015; Han, 2016, January 15).

When searching for professional perceptions on LBC, I found that a large number of LBC have received increasing scholarly attention from diverse perspectives using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Some observations indicated that LBC were at a higher risk for problematic behaviours at the two extremes, being either withdrawn or excessively aggressive (Yang, 2005). A study of 250 middle-school students left behind in a rural area in Hubei Province found that more than half of them experienced difficulties in adapting to parents’ emigration, and approximately half of them performed poorly in school (Li & Wen, 2009). A group of scholars, using a self-administered questionnaire, compared the health status and health-related behaviours of left-behind adolescent school children and their counterparts in a rural area in Southern China (Gao, Li, Kim, Congdon, Lau, & Griffiths, 2010). Through a community based cross-sectional study on a representative sample in rural China, a research study by Jia and Tian (2010) concluded that the LBC are at significant risk of loneliness.

Other researchers have looked at the deep impacts of rural parents’ migration on the care giving and nurturing of LBC. One study highlights the fact that the LBC have been the unfortunate outcome of China’s Urbanisation, disproportionately bearing the cost for China’s unprecedented transformative industrialisation (Jingzhong & Lu, 2011). Others have examined the associations between internet addiction and depression in migrant children (MC) and LBC and found that that internet addiction might be associated with an increased risk of depression in LBC, and migration was an important risk factor for child depression (Guo, Chen, Wang, Liu, Chui, He, & Tian, 2012). A further study, using a structured questionnaire that included questions about socio-demographic characteristics, social anxiety, family function, quality of life, neglect and physical abuse, concluded that LBC have a relatively higher level of social anxiety and poorer living conditions than non-LBC (Zhao, Chen, Chen, Lv, Jiang & Sun, 2014).
These scholars have greatly enriched public knowledge around the current situation of LBC and have made public that LBC have many issues: physical and mental safety, health and education. But very few researchers have asked what schools have done in respect to this social inequality: how school plays its social role preparing Chinese youth for their different futures. For my research, I am keen to know how today’s Chinese schooling system has been coping with this emerging problem through social and economic reform.

11.1. 2. Schooling enrolment policies

I believe Jiao’s story provides a glimpse into this process. When Jiao, after finishing her primary school in her rural hometown, came to M City to join her parents and help take care of her younger brother, she found that she could not catch up with others:

> Probably we have used the different text books and I had never learned English when in the hometown, and all other classmates seemed excellent in English while I know nothing about it. I strongly feel my inferiority. Back in hometown, we learn only Chinese and math. So when in Year 7, it seems that all other classmates are good at English. But I know nothing. (Jiao, Chapter Eight)

The problem of left-behind children, raised by Jiao’s story, requires examination of local school enrolment policies. Chapter Five described a piece of datum on the enrolment policy from the local primary school in M City: to get enrolled, one’s family must provide three documents: hukou, a Family Planning Service Certificate (FPSC) and a property ownership certificate. I could not make up my mind whether to include this in the case report until I had finished Jiao’s story, asking myself what it means to include hukou and FPSC in the primary school’s enrolment policy.

Among the three requirements, I find the requirement of the property ownership certificate the easiest to understand if deploying Bourdieu’s theories of ‘capital’ and ‘field’. To unravel the nexus between schooling and the reproduction of social structure, Bourdieu expands the concept of capital and breaks it down into different species: social capital, cultural capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Regarding the value of capital, it is determined by its convertibility (Bourdieu, 1986). That is, social and cultural capital will mean little if they cannot be converted to other types of capital, especially economic capital. Similarly, economic capital acquires its sociological significance only when it is converted to social and cultural capital, thus translating economic inequalities to particular social relations and cultural representations.
The conversion of capitals can happen in different ‘fields’. The concept of ‘field’, for Bourdieu, is a social arena of struggle over the appropriation of certain species of capital. A field is constituted by the relational differences in position of social agents, and the boundaries of a field are demarcated by where its effects end. Different fields can be either autonomous or interrelated. The field of power is peculiar in that it exists ‘horizontally’ through all of the fields and the struggles within it control the ‘exchange rate’ of the forms of cultural, symbolic, or physical capital between the fields themselves (Bourdieu, 1984). Schooling can be ideal as a ‘field’ where the capitals become convertible. Rich parents have the economic capital to buy the expensive in-zone house, pay for the best schooling and private tutoring; socially or politically powerful families are more likely to have connections within the education system to help their children get into the best schools, or get extra support; as a result, credentials and degrees from prestigious universities help the owners to stand out in the job market.

The theory of ‘capital’ and ‘field’ works well so far to highlight the possible pattern of how schooling helps favour individuals from socioeconomically advantaged families to maintain the privilege through learning in order to become socially made winners. But it sounds somewhat a forced analogy to label the other two documents as any of the species of capital: hukou and FPSC, which makes China a special case here. In essence, they are more Chinese State-generated forces than any species of capital. For the current study, the analysis must leave aside FPSC, which may require future further research to make sense of having it as a compulsory requirement for children’s schooling.

Hukou, unique to China, once included into schooling enrolment policies, seems to confer a role to schools, and this role, nothing to do with education, contributes intimately to the large group of people who are becoming losers in the modern world’s meritocratic competition: the LBC and those who are not born in an economically developed area in China. Quoting a popular slogan in China here: they lose at their birthplace.

This concept of losers and winners brings forth the problematic meritocracy of Chinese gaokao that has become an ideology, and the gaokao losers.

11.2. Gaokao Meritocracy and Schooling Losers

What options do you think we, the classroom teachers can have, but to push our students to work harder? Do they have other options? We have to be realistic and they have to face this reality in our society. (Mr Yu, Chapter Nine)
The reality is complex, with several connotations, from a classroom teacher’s perspective: how much can a classroom teacher, or a school, or one family do towards certain injustice generated by the State? Under an authoritarian environment, can they (the teacher and the schools) raise their voices towards the evaluation carried out on them? How much autonomy can a classroom teacher enjoy? There is much to explore, but I focus on the fundamental concern: gaokao. The reason for gaokao being fundamental for stakeholders is that it largely contributes to people’s resignation towards socio-political and economic inequality and is aided by the concept of meritocracy.

11.2.1. Gaokao meritocracy becoming ideology in China

This interpretation requires some background. Gaokao in modern China was only established in the 1950s, but the long tradition of standardised national examinations in China dates back 1400 years, to the Imperial era, under the name of the Civil Service Examination. A recent predecessor of gaokao was the joint college entrance examination, adopted by the Kuomintang (KMT) government, which was designed to strengthen the ideological controls over intellectuals through the centralised mechanism (Chen, 2007). Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the CCP has succeeded and adapted the KMT’s system to the gaokao system. Gaokao has since become a standardised nationwide system for higher education (HE) admission. The system was interrupted from 1966 to 1977 owing to the outbreak of the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, a time when the ‘red’ classes, including workers, peasants and party members, had priority in accessing HE (Li & Walder, 2001, p. 1387); gaokao was restored in 1978, and academic performance, instead of political affiliation, became the decisive factor in access to HE.

Among the group of scholars engaged in researching within the theme of educational inequality and gaokao (also named the Chinese College Entrance Examination [CCEL] or the National College Entrance Examination [NCEE]), I find the research by Wang Li (2008, 2011) and Liu Ye (2013, 2016) significant to my case study.

Wang Li (2008, 2011) pointed out that the sea change in Chinese society in the past four decades may have gradually changed the countenance of gaokao. A series of gaokao policies have gradually induced lower social groups, such as the working class and peasants who lost their previous social security and welfare during the reform, to believe that they are scholastically inferior. These policies are about the expansion of higher education (HE) and HE finance system and differentiated HE admission.
First came the HE expansion and the change of the HE finance system (Wu & Zheng, 2008) in the late 1990s, which preluded the commercialisation of HE. The rationale behind this was the narrative of “revitalizing China through developing science and education” (科教兴国/kejiao xingguo) within the global context of a knowledge-based economy: the demand for higher education in society after the adoption of the market economy was growing. In 1985, the CCCCPC (the Central Committee of CCP) promulgated the Decision of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the Reform of Educational Structure, which allowed a small number of students to be admitted into HE, exceeding the quota of the State plan on condition that they paid certain amount of education cost.

The meaning of HE expansion has to be read together with the Chinese HE finance system. When, in the Mao era, the state assumed the major responsibilities in financing and providing education, university education was free. By the end of 1990s, the HE finance system changed from a model supported by three different government authorities (the Ministry of Education, other central ministries and regional governments) to a co-funding model supported by students and in most cases their parents, the Ministry of Education representing the central government (to fund only 107 national key universities) and local governments to be responsible for supporting all non-key universities (Huang, 2005). Since then, the share of government contribution to HE finances has gradually declined, pushing HE to rely more and more on tuition fees¹¹ (Wan, 2006).

What exacerbated the inequality which came out of economic reform is the differentiated gaokao admission policy. A university usually sets a fixed admission quota for each province, with a higher number of students coming from its home province¹². It makes sense for local universities to have more local students because they have a mission of serving their community; but the elite universities financed directly by the central ministries adopt the same policy without a justifiable reason.

¹¹By contrast, tuition fees in China are lower than in many other countries such as the UK (i.e., £3225 or USD 6450 in 2009) (BBC, 2009); however, the tuition fees account for approximately 60% of average household disposable income (per capita annual) in China compared to 22% in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

¹²It is noted that among the top 107 universities selected by the ‘211 project’, 22 are located in Beijing and 10 in Shanghai (MOE 2007) (MOE, 2007, List of universities in ‘211 project’). In 2010, the acceptance rates in the first-ranking category universities for students from Beijing, Shanghai, Shandong and Henan were 20.1%, 18%, 7.1% and 3.5% respectively.
Seen in the broader context of the stark regional disparity in terms of social resources distribution and economic development, HE expansion in essence means more schooling opportunities for people from cities and areas that benefit from the State’s tilted economic policies. In conclusion, when China undertakes dramatic socio-economic changes, the gaokao system intensifies educational inequality.

When inequality happens, the ideology of meritocracy helps to legitimise it.

Meritocracy, viewed from a sociological perspective, has been a controversial term. The rise of meritocracy theory was related to dramatic changes in economic, occupational and technological domains after the Second World War in Western post-industrial societies (Young, 1958; Bell, 1973; Goldthorpe, 1996). Bell (1973) interpreted meritocracy as educational qualifications and Young as “intelligence plus effort” (1958, p. 94); Krauze and Slomczynski defined meritocracy as “a large-scale social system in which a positive relationship exists between merit and such commonly desired values as income, power, and prestige” (1985, p. 623).

Even without a universally agreed definition of merit, what seems widely accepted is that formal education can be used as the key variable to measure meritocracy and the educational system is regarded as a selection mechanism that measures and rewards merit (Olneck & Crouse, 1979; Goldthorpe, 1996); this is largely due to the central role of education in examining the process of social status attainment from social origin to destination in the meritocracy thesis (Lipset & Zetterberg, 1959; Bell, 1973). According to meritocracy theory, therefore, an education-based meritocracy can be said to exist where educational attainment is unrelated to social origin and a decisive influence on social destination (Liu, 2013). Though many individuals accept the notion that schooling serves to maximise the possibility of personal mobility, leading in some direct fashion to the ability to live a better life later on, little empirical evidence has been revealed to support the notion of a significant trend towards meritocracy in these societies (Breen & Goldthorpe, 2001; Whelan & Layte, 2002). It is intergenerational inheritance, however, that has been persistently identified in educational and occupational attainment (Jackson, 2007; Arrow, Bowles, & Durlauf, 2000). For if meritocracy works, as Michael Apple powerfully pointed out, people can expect the relationship between test scores and measure of adult success rising over time, and the relationship between family background and adult success falling. Unfortunately, “Neither of
this is the case. Instead, current evidence seems to indicate that there has been little consistent loosening of the ties between origins and attainments through schools” (Apple, 2012, p. 38).

Returning to the Chinese case, Liu (2013) examined the origins of meritocracy in Chinese culture and made a comparative study between Western and Chinese meritocracy. Through a powerful analysis on the unequal distribution of educational opportunities and HE selection policies, Liu summarises that today’s gaokao, with some carefully cultivated appearances of neutrality and disinterestedness, is but a facade of meritocracy, as it effectively filters out a substantial number of students from socio-economically disadvantaged families. What is worthy of special attention here is meritocracy becoming a strong ideology used by the CCP (Chinese Communist Party) during China’s transition to a market economy:

The widening inequality, the political uncertainty, and conflicts in social relationships in the 1980s converged to a point that a political strategy was needed to justify the social inequality and to restore confidence in the regime. The ‘Development and Stability’ was proposed to deal with the turbulent reality and the ideology vacuum. The key to this strategy is to manipulate the ideology. Communism and egalitarianism were replaced with a patriotic orientation (Walder, 2009), a renaissance of traditional values (Spence, 2008) and the widespread belief in meritocracy. The new ideologies accommodated the changes in political, economic and social contexts. Central to the transitional ideology is meritocracy ... By inducing the underprivileged groups to believe in meritocracy, the risk of threat to the current political order was diminished, and the intensified contradictions that emerged during the early stages of the transition were mitigated. Thus, the ideology of meritocracy is manipulated by the Party to restore political order and to integrate the divisive social interests. (Liu, 2016, p. 83)

In this context, gaokao, with its embedded ideology of meritocracy, contributes significantly to Chinese schooling pinggu (assessment/evaluation) that is done in an overwhelmingly quantised manner.

11.2.2. Quantised assessment and schooling losers

As has been demonstrated in this case study, through an authoritarian mechanism deploying a marking system, assessment and evaluation in Chinese schools have become algorithms: the individual’s daily behaviour in the dormitory can be meticulously managed through marking.
Classroom behaviours, even morality is numbered; winning class honours such as the title of the “Class of Civilisation”, which honours collectivism, mainly relies on the scores in the mechanism. With some empathy, it is not difficult to imagine a quantised standard for the title of “Class of Civilisation”, “Excellent Class”, “Outstanding Student”, “Excellent Teacher”, and “Quality Teaching”. This mechanism, however, works not only at the level of the individual, but also at an institutional level and can be seen in the way in which the National Evaluation for Balanced Development of Compulsory Education (NEBDCE) was conducted.

By having this pinggu mechanism working at both individual and institutional levels, the complex nature of schooling life is simplified; both teaching and learning quality and school management are mostly judged by test scores, and consequently the classroom teaching remains test-oriented and schooling hours are longer than they should be. The test scores, not surprisingly, have become a very decisive factor in most parent-child relationships, as shown in this comment:

When talking, she (the mother) asks and I answer. It always ends with her nagging at my dumb hobbies or my sucky test scores ... She had never asked about my interest or my plan for a future. None of my family did that, not once. (Gao, Chapter Eight)

While not on speaking terms with parents, students are unwilling to resort to asking for the teacher’s help:

What can they (the teachers) do? The most they can do is to tell me to be good at home and study more during my time back home. (Jiao, Chapter Eight)

What can the teachers do? The teachers have to be realistic within the classrooms.

Another reality exists outside the school. Corresponding to the hukou system, the distribution of political power and responsibility within the Chinese state is strictly defined by one’s birthplace (Biao, 2007, p. 181); an individual’s human capital, like one’s occupation, years of schooling and working location in the labour market, is largely determined by the place (rural versus urban) where one was born and received one’s compulsory education (Fu & Ren, 2010). What seems clear is that the Chinese case of social injustice and schooling inequality is distinct from other societies in that the State has instituted a system designating citizens in its own country different rights and privileges (Biao, 2007; Chan, 2012; Lu & Wang, 2013). That is to say, faced with the multiple forms of inequality generated fundamentally by
national/institutional policies, it does not seem right to put the blame on individuals, neither teacher nor student.

But this knowledge/reality has to be carefully filtered out of the classrooms, as has been illustrated in Chapter Ten (The ‘Winners’ and ‘Losers’). What is left is a strong message: the winners win in life because they study hard at school and the losers lose because they do not; one deserves and, therefore, should accept whatever happens in life. The political and practical importance of gaokao in Chinese society increases competition among students, and under the heightened experiences of liminality within an exam-oriented teaching system, the teacher does not seem able to see any other option but to perpetuate the existing pattern of inequality. Our young people are not supported to ponder over the fact that the ‘losers’ in our society are probably those who have throughout their life been working the hardest; neither are they encouraged to ask or explore what might be behind this myth. They are carefully protected from certain cruel social facts and receive teaching which is lacking in a concept of equality and social justice: it is an insufficient input from the individual that makes one a loser. Understandably, most individuals who are born a ‘loser’ comfortably blame ‘self’ for their failure in life:

* I guess I have just been too lazy ... and I might have played much in Year 8.* (Jiao, Chapter Eight)

Today’s schooling in China, in a unique political context, through enrolment policies both in primary schools and universities, standardised examinations and a quantised assessment mechanism, aided by the meritocratic ethos, works to make social injustice self-justifying while reinforcing a self-fulfilling prophecy. Schooling meritocracy helps only to hide the unequal distribution of educational resource and invites the individuals to take the blame for their not being successful in schooling life in China.

The discussion thus far, led by problems emerging during the study and supported by both fieldwork data and relevant literature, has mainly provided an interpretation of the issues as follows: who the left-behind children are and why they are left behind in China; how certain national and schooling policies cause and perpetuate the existing inequality in education; and how the quantised assessment method working with gaokao meritocracy in an authoritarian culture effectively induces people to embrace the inequality in life.

Briefly, two problems stand out: schooling equality and quality, which have, in fact, been the focus for recent Chinese educational reform. The schooling life recorded so far, however, has
reflected the disconnection between the reforms and reality in today’s China. What follows is an investigation of how reality seems disconnected from the reforms and how people come to live with it.

11.3. The Reform-Reality Disconnection and Resignation

When looking into Chinese people’s reaction towards the reform-reality disconnection, I believe it helpful to quote the question from Engleton (1991, p. 114): “How is the working class to take power in a social formation where the dominant power is subtly, pervasively diffused throughout habitual daily practices intimately interwoven with culture itself, inscribed in the very texture of our experience from nursery school to funeral parlour?”

11.3.1. The reform-reality disconnection

As stated in Chapter One, originally this research was driven, among other concerns, by the worrying situation whereby today’s Chinese young people are experiencing insufferable pressure in their schooling, which goes against the current educational reforms. The fieldwork experience later showed more about how the reality of schooling has been kept apart from the reform, and the particular data are included in the section A Cold Gust for Schooling Equality and Quality in M School (Chapter Ten). The move towards the study of the reform-reality disconnection was influenced by M School’s move to temporarily change the schooling time to shorter hours and to ensure all the staff and students recite some rules and answers for the NEBDCE (the National Evaluation of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education).

Replace the existing subject-based senior secondary school curriculum structure with a three-level structure consisting of learning fields, subjects and modules; adopt an elective course and credit system; give students the opportunity to choose their courses; improve students’ generic skills of independent inquiry, cooperation, communication and problem-solving; and establish a formative evaluation system and connect students’ academic performance with their growth portfolio. (MOE, 2003)

Such is the description of the new syllabus stipulated in the national curriculum reform. Within this module, inquiry-based learning comprises 15 of 116 credits and is a required course in all senior secondary schools (MOE, 2003). Reformers have thus positioned inquiry-based learning as one of the most “valued” courses in the curriculum. It is now worth more credits than traditionally important courses such as Chinese, foreign languages and mathematics (each of which is worth only 10 credits). The government has dedicated itself to
changing the long-standing traditions of teacher-centred learning and students-as-passive-learners to student-centred teaching and learning (Walker & Qian, 2015).

However, the reality, as has been shown by the meticulous quantified test score school report issued at the Parents-Teacher meeting of Class 6, is that each school must still perform well on gaokao if it is to be ranked as successful both officially and unofficially. Given that inquiry-based learning is not examined, it is not regarded as vital to the quality of a school and, therefore, its “attractiveness” decreases for parents.

Several prominent studies are able to shed light on the causes of the disconnection. Early in 2004, the study by Cui and Xia (2004), with a focus on the school-based curriculum development, drew attention to the tensions between curriculum reform experts and curriculum scholars, and the chasm between the policy and its practice. Wang (2012) looked into the accumulated and apparent conflicts in the conception and practice of curriculum during the process of curriculum reform. However, the data set these scholars rely upon most were concepts and misconceptions—the text of policy statement, or some theoretical viewpoints—while the voices of the curriculum practitioners, the teachers and school management for instance, were unfortunately excluded from the discussion.

It is fortunate that other scholars have ameliorated this situation. School leaders’ perceptions of the reforms were explored by Ke’s study on schools’ implementation action of “research-based learning” (2008). His study in Jiangsu province illustrated how school principals muddled through the new reform “in a serious way”. By “in a serious way”, Ke implied that schools were careful to ensure they looked like they were implementing the reform policies in a meaningful fashion, when in fact they believed the reform was out of sync with the reality of school life. From the perspective of the local school principal, the reform policies seem a “totally blind top-down requirement”. Even though most schools did not actually promote inquiry-based learning, they did not seem to worry about external inspections. When talking about how to deal with such inspections, school principals often said they simply “did some paperwork” (p. 68).

Lee and Yin (2005, 2011) looked at the problem from the teachers’ perspective. Because educational reform always involves many human elements, including interpersonal relationships and social interactions with its associated dynamics (Norman 2010), emotion is inevitably one part of the commitment that teachers bring to the change process. However, while being the practitioners of all kinds of educational reforms, teachers’ voices,
perspectives and feelings are unfortunately and frequently ignored or marginalised in implementing mandated educational changes (Bailey, 2000). The reforms were very likely to seriously disturb teachers’ everyday professional practice in schools. A better implementation of reform policies, proposed by Lee and Yin, entails smooth and quick communication between the reformers and the frontline teachers. This proposal is in line with the communication disconnection identified by Walker and Qian (2015).

Walker and Qian (2012, 2015) went further, exploring the causes for the reform-reality gap, and pointing out that education reform has not been delivered as proposed or promised in China. Walker and Qian revealed that despite the willingness from the policymakers of Chinese central government to introduce quite radical reforms, they remain reluctant to address certain components, including the role schools play in ideological training and the impact of the high-stakes exam system. Based on a pool of reform policies towards schooling equality and quality from the Chinese Ministry of Education (MoE) and several key talks on educational reform by the Premiers in charge of education then Prime Minister (Li Lanqing, 1998-2003, and Wen Jiabao, 2003-2013), the authors looked at the main elements combining to lessen and hinder the meaningful implementation of reform policies in schools and identified five types of disconnection: instrumental, intellectual, political, cultural and communicative. The conclusion is that concerns over change and stability typify the education reform environment in China (Walker & Qian, 2012).

These inquiry endeavours towards removing the barriers between reform and reality are admirable, but there seems to be more to explore. For example:

It is in this context that all the school staff in M City have been engaged in preparing for the upcoming NEBDCE in December, 2015. The M Secondary School has been secretly noticed as a possible evaluand, hence the faculty meeting. But it turns out to be misinformation. Another secondary school in the same district gets inspected. (Chapter Ten)

This seems a protracted game of cat and mouse, except that this is not a game. I take this ‘hide and seek’ move to be a clue that the top authority may have been aware of the problematic ‘pinggu’ and is willing to try every means of amelioration; but due to the fact that schooling is unapologetically a process imbued with complexity and heavily tinted with humanistic tone, any simplistic means, however prudently contrived, cannot work effectively
for that end. What prevents the amelioration of the Chinese evaluation mechanism given that people are not unaware of the problems?

Examples in point here are the three anecdotes I recorded in Chapter Six (The Lounge). When faced with wrong, or abuse, or any infringement in life, the teachers have learned to show resignation, telling themselves “This is China” and “Don’t take that seriously. It is a show and people know it is a show”. And Jun, the gatekeeper, after experiencing the turmoil of several crises in Chinese society and having experienced a traumatised personal life, he still willingly and prudently maintains a loyalty towards the Party, though not without the awareness of the root problem. What is supporting this resignation and inertia?

11.3.2. Resignation

To explore how those in school live with a range of disconnections between what the government promises and what they actually have in life I propose a careful look at the narrative of ‘collectivism’, ‘socialist patriotism’ and ‘the basic reality of the country’, and the schooling managing system named Ban Gan Bu/班干部 / (classroom cardres).

Chinese are observed to be more collectivist than most other populations on earth and this cultural trait can be traced back predominantly to Confucian heritage (Bond & Hwang, 2008; Nisbett, 2003). In modern China, the supreme status of collectivism seems more of an ideological echo to the rhetoric of ‘socialist patriotism’ than just a cultural element in social life. The CCP, shortly after seizing power, defined three levels of socialist patriotism. Zhao summarises that “At the first level, individuals should subordinate their personal interests to the interests of the state. At the second level, individuals should subordinate their personal destiny to the destiny of our socialist system. At the third level, individuals should subordinate their personal future to the future of our communist cause” (2004, p. 28).

Working alongside this concept is the narrative of ‘the basic reality of the country’. It describes the basic reality of China as the ‘four supers’ of the civilisational stage: population, territory, tradition and culture. China’s greatest strength may rely on these. China has the richest human resources and the largest consumer market; China has unparalleled geopolitical and geo-economics states; China has its own tradition of independent thinking, and has the richest cultural resources in the world. However, it is the reverse interpretation of this narrative, I argue, that carries a much stronger message with more far-reaching influence on Chinese people’s thought patterns. If China abandons its own model and adopts the Western model, then the greatest strengths that China has as a civilisational state may turn out to be its
greatest weaknesses. Hundreds of states in one may become “hundreds of states in conflict”: its emphasis on harmonious politics may become adversary politics, its huge population a rich source of contentions, and its unified vast territory split and disintegrated, and its diverse traditions the pretexts for endless disputes and its cultural richness source for cultural clashes (Zhang, 2016, pp. 159-160).

By ‘socialist patriotism’ and ‘the basic reality of the country’, individuality in China is expectedly subdued, unconditionally, to the State, which is emblematic of collectivism. The symbolic power of this collectivist rhetoric has been rampant in people’s daily schooling experience, ranging from the classroom decoration—for instance, the place of a national flag in the middle of the front wall—to all kinds of patriotic slogans on campus, to varied ceremony-like activities—namely, the weekly flag raising, the Young Pioneer recruitment in primary schools, and the Communist Youth League recruitment in secondary schools. As shown by empirical fieldwork, the value of collectivism is further internalised through school military training (see Episode 1, Chapter Seven).

Here I invite the reader to reflect on what happens at the ceremony:

*Quietly and in a well-trained manner... All in good order and in two or three minutes 48 classes have gone back to the classrooms. The campus resumes its silence.* (Flag-Raising Ceremony, Chapter Six)

It is this efficacy of about 2,400 young boys and girls that cries for attention. When these young people go back to the classroom (as described in classroom life in Class 6, Year 10, in Chapter Six), there is no sign of the “crowded nature” of classroom life highlighted by Philip W. Jackson (1968), although the class size in China is much bigger than that in Western countries. To understand this efficacy, I propose a close look at the mechanism of student cadres (Ban Gan Bu/班干部).

Out of the body of students, this special group of students—the student cadres—look exceptionally helpful in regulating their peers:

*Several student cadres, one for each grade, skilfully count the number of the students in each class and take the register, which can be used as the cause for the deduction of marks. ... With the student cadres’ work, counting the heads in a large number is done promptly before 7:30 a.m. and the head teachers, if interested, can have the names of the absentees.* (Flag-Raising Ceremony, Chapter Six).
The significant role of the body of class cadres in managing and controlling the class is verified by the head teacher:

_Usually there are five top leaders... By having 33 out of 44 as classroom leaders in class 5, the rest 11 are well supervised. (He grins.) Managing class can be easy in that way._ (Episode 1. Chapter Seven)

The theory and methodology of having class cadres is a heritage from Anton Semyonovich Makarenko (13 January 1888 to 1 April 1939). The essence of having class cadres is for Makarenko to “upbring in self-governing child collectives” (Filonov, 2000). The practice, however, also has its critics. Vavokhine (2004), for example, recapitulates that this system has been criticised for giving the child collective too much power over the individual child; and Vladimir Sirotin (2016) described this pedagogical behaviour as “the bard of punitive pedagogy” whose ideas were contrary to democratic freedoms and human rights including the natural rights of child and parents. With an intention of looking at this possibly hidden but omnipresent influence of this system, I find the following a vivid reflection to the related experience:

Incidentally, although Makarenko appears to demonstrate that demands must be reasonable, comprehensible, and feasible, he still emphasizes the necessity of obeying them without reservation or argument; there is no doubt about this. He envisions no right to refuse to carry out any instruction or demand, even one that is excessively onerous, humiliating, cruel, or whimsical ... at the instigation of their elders the children’s collective must bait and badger individual children; on instructions from the higher ups, the majority must persecute the minority. And if you refuse to take part, then you will become a victim yourself! (Sirotin, 1978)

This tradition has been so entrenched in China that a handbook for class cadres in primary schools, authored by Wang Xiyong, was published in July 2009. Although there is no substantial research on this school management tradition in China, a discussion of the unexpectedly damaging consequences on youth has emerged among the netizens. The discussion has recognised the stratification among the students in classroom life: the class cadre is the top leader with most power, the group leaders under the class cadre are the second layer of power holder, and the rest take the position as the dominated. This practice faces charges of incitement to power seeking of Chinese children from an age too early in a man-made hierarchical classroom life that is bureaucratic. What seems thorny is the bribery and gift-giving ethos bred out of this practice in primary and secondary schools, and
concomitantly the involvement of the parents’ socio-economic status. This ‘bribery ethos’ can be empirically demonstrated:

The gate closes punctually at 7:40 a.m. and 2:10 p.m., usually with two student cadres standing guarding the gate and one sitting behind a desk to have people registered for their lateness.... But still there are stories telling how smart the young people can be—if they know which student cadres are on duty, they will build guanxi with the cadres and then they can benefit from that guanxi. (The Lounge, Chapter Six)

The student cadres appear powerful to their peers, but the power claimed here is at the cost of being unconditionally submissive to the teachers. This can be seen from the head teacher’s strategy of organising the body of class cadres:

People at this age can be rebellious ... if you (the head teacher) notice that you need to nip that in the bud, or you invite trouble. I will just name the leader group. The students are not stupid, they are good at reading the message, they grow too and they will understand the good intention behind. (Episode 1. Chapter Seven)

What is in common with the Western schooling is the concept of ‘negotiation of power and control’ (Philip Jackson); but the distinction lies in Yu’s comment on the condition for an elected body of class cadres:

Of course they (the student) can (elect whoever they like to be class cadres, but only) if I (the head teacher) agree I mean. (Episode 1. Chapter Seven)

With the group of class cadres coming out of the student body and working efficiently, helping the authority to supervise the student group, the individual student is actually under an omnipresent surveillance in schooling life. And this insider surveillant group is armed with a quantised assessing mechanism and pervasive meritocratic ethos in school life. I believe these greatly contribute to the reticence of the individual student.

In sum, what emerges is that today’s public ordinary schooling in China serves more as a controlling instrument than as an emancipatory institution or as an instrument of social mobility, and it seems the will from the State.

This section has focused on the general situation of reform and reality disconnection and how those in schooling come to live with the frustration. Rather than a discussion of collectivism versus individualism, the core value of this analysis lies in how individuality perishes through
schooling. It has been well perceived that single-factor explanations are seldom useful for understanding complex phenomena such as how hidden curricula works. I set out, therefore, to examine interactive impacts of ideological hegemony, governmental rhetoric of school managerial measures on individuality. Precisely, the apprehension of ‘the basic reality of the country’, working together with the internalised values of ‘collectivism’ and ‘socialist patriotism’, propagates inertia, not merely at the individual level, but also at the institutional level. The mechanism of student cadres has been studied in this section because it, working together with the meritocratic ethos and quantised assessment measures, contributes to the self-regulating, and docile students willingly embracing the existing power structure.

By summary, through a case-based evaluative inquiry and grounded in people’s daily schooling life, this study endeavours to provide empirical evidence of hidden curriculum in Chinese schooling. There are several mini cases in this analysis piece, namely the schooling enrolment policy and the ‘left-behind children’, meritocracy and schooling losers, and the reform-reality disconnection and people’s resignation. Led by issues emerging from the fieldwork, the analysis reviews the existing inequality in schools—that which seems generated by economic and political policies supported by Chinese State—most importantly, how schooling culture helps people to embrace the inequality or injustice in life. Substantially, this study explores the possible interactivity among the spheres of schooling culture, economic and political changes in today’s China. “We are doubtless far from realizing the potential efficacy of education as a constructive agency of improving society, from realizing that it represents not only a development of children and youth but also of the future society of which they will be the constituents” (Dewey, 1985, p. 85). This seems true in China.

What is this case for? It can be a case of Chinese hidden curriculum.
Chapter Twelve: A System of Social and Curriculum Study in China

I have argued in the first section of this thesis that out of concern over the nature of this study I have chosen to engage in a case-based evaluative inquiry with responsive (Robert Stake) or democratic ethos (Barry MacDonald). The significance of examining the methodology behind the CBEI model lies in the situation where while Chinese society has seen dramatic socio-economic changes, many disciplines such as sociology and educational sociology in mainland China remain at a rudimentary stage. It is legitimate that Chinese scholars can learn, for example from the more advanced Western theories in the field of educational sociology, when looking at social phenomena, such as societal stratification, inequality in schooling access and the school’s social function. Even so, Chinese society is distinct from Western society in terms of history, tradition, culture, politics, and we must continue to question the applicability of research methods and methodologies established within Western culture.

This background encourages thinking for methodological indigenisation, and four key aspects of curriculum research methodology have been discussed. First, what is meant by a constructivism-interpretivist stance towards social inquiry—since it seems that how one looks can be decisive towards what one can see? Second, in a social investigating climate distinct from that where constructivism and interpretivism originated, how much room is there for the Chinese social inquirer’s employment of methodological individualism in an environment dominated by cultural and political collectivism? Third, in a study where the protocols of conducting social inquiry established in Western culture are tried in the Chinese context, how does contextual idiosyncrasy affect ethics? Last, but also most importantly, with evaluative social inquiry becoming personal and political, how is validity achieved and how and what can be generalised from one singular case study?

12.1. How to Look and What to See

The first point I would like to explore is how the lens one uses to look at social phenomena can determine what one might see. Again, this is inspired by problematic issues from the fieldwork: though the schooling staff were organised by their authority to actively prepare for pinggu (Chinese authoritarian evaluation), I have seen the indifference in the teachers towards the impending pinggu; I have seen the teachers’ inertia towards the reform-reality disconnection, and the situation where their professional performance is judged by standards
set by outsiders; I have seen the attempt initiated by central government to improve educational equality working in vain—I have seen a school quite different from that which pinggu people will see.

As can be assured by the documentation collected from M School’s faculty pinggu preparation meeting, the school sees to it that pinggu officials will see reform policies honestly implemented and educational equality satisfactorily ameliorated; even if the officials do interviews, the interviewees are organised to learn the correct answers to the questions the officials will possibly ask. Put simply, the officials, holding authority in hand, are likely to see and hear what people assume they would prefer.

The pinggu data set indicates that from one target school, different observers can see different things, and tell different stories, depending on what lens they employ, or even a different angle set with the same lens. A lot may depend on how one looks and what one can see; for example, the power relationship involved in the social inquiry process: how much authority should the inquirer claim or whose voice should be raised? I Intend to focus on the core concept which lays the cornerstone of research methodology: the nature of social reality and the germane methods for the truth-seeking process; put another way, whether there is an objective reality or whether the reality should be taken as socially constructed.

12.1.1. The nature of social reality

Although for political reasons there has been very little discussion of ontological stance in Chinese social science, there are scholars exploring this. Xiangming Chen had, in 1996, conducted what can be regarded by Chinese scholars as the first qualitative case study in Chinese educational research, investigating what caused Wang Xiaogang, a 15-year-old boy, to drop out of schooling. Here is an excerpt from the researcher’s report of her conversation with Ma Li and his peasant parents, looking into whether Wang Xiaogang experienced physical violence from his teacher (Chen, 1996, p. 40). Ma Li is a 15-year-old boy and former classmate of the school dropout, Wang Xiaogang.

Researcher (Chen Xiangming): Have you seen your teacher, Mr Han beating one of your classmates?

Ma Li: I heard about that, but I haven’t seen that.

Researcher: Well, I am from Beijing, and I am researching on school droppers and I can assure you that whatever you tell me will be well kept in secret. Trust me and no one else will know what you tell. So do your teachers beat you guys?
Ma Li: Yes, once I saw him, Mr Han beating one who couldn’t recite what he required us to.

Researcher: Are you afraid of Mr Han?

Ma Li: Not really, because Mr Li beats worse. He teaches English.

Mother (With a knowing smile): Spare the rod, spoil the child.

Father: The teachers beat them for their good. Beating the students is reasonable if they are not hard working and we parents don’t know how to educate.

Having heard different stories from people involved in the same event, the researcher concluded in the report that she felt it was almost impossible to know the “reality”: Wang Xiaogang said he dropped out because he was beaten up by his teacher, Mr Han; while Ma Li, his classmate, seemed unable to tell what kind of beating should be categorised as “physical punishment”; Mr Han and the school denied what Wang Xiaogang had stated; the parents agreed that the teacher beat the students for their own good. Since whether Mr Han beat Wang Xiaogang seemed unable to be determined, it became difficult to know what could have caused Wang Xiaogang to drop out of school (Chen, 1996. pp. 39-40).

Guba and Lincoln (1994, p. 108) claim that before embarking on any research project, the researcher should review one’s vision of the world: What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it? The answer, I believe, largely relies on the nature of the study. This study, rather than “measuring” the quality of schooling with a given “ruler”, aims at collecting perspectives and judgement from the participants. The perspectives and judgement come from the daily reality of the individuals. “It is well for us to keep in mind that human events are dominated by chance and choice, which are extremely subject to change” (House, 1980, p. 34). Reality, therefore, shifts accordingly to the change of culture, time, space, value norms and traditions: in China, classroom life in Beijing does not seem the same as in a classroom in other cities. It does not seem challenging to accept that the nature of reality in social science tends to be multifaceted, multi-layered and volatile.

In sum, it seems reasonable to perceive social reality as “based on people’s definition of it” (Neuman, 1997, p. 69) “through their action and interaction” (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991, p. 14), and that it is locally and specifically constructed (Guba & Lincoln). With the nature of social reality being unstable, the truth-seeking process in social investigation tends to be unpredictable. It is out of this ontological assertion that grows a consistent epistemological position: constructivist-interpretivist.
12.1.2. Epistemological stance: constructivism-interpretivism

Epistemology answers the question “What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?” (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108). As an emerging educational researcher, epistemologically I feel the appeal of the constructivism and interpretivism paradigm:

[Constructivists] share the goal of understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it. This goal is variously spoken of as an abiding concern for the life world, for the emic point of view, for understanding meaning, for grasping the actor’s definition of a situation, for Verstehen. The world of lived reality and situation-specific meanings that constitute the general object of investigation is thought to be constructed by social actors. That is, particular actors, in particular places, at particular times, fashion meaning out of events and phenomena through prolonged, complex processes of social interaction involving history, language and action. (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118)

Other than its theoretical strength, my inclination to accept this perspective has been shaped more by my fieldwork practice, where my assumed reality is frequently in conflict with that of the participant. The twenty-four-hour surveillance in the classroom can be illustrative (Episode 4, Chapter Seven, p. 96): Working in a classroom equipped with a twenty-four-hour surveillance, through empathy I would have taken it to be privacy violating and would have expected to hear the teacher’s complaint about it. This empathy was heavily tinted with my own values, and it turned out to be disconfirming when compared with how the teacher viewed it: Mr Yu, who teaches in the case study school, takes it to be protective and, instead, gives his “happy cooperation” (Apple, 2004, p. 91). This, however, is possibly a sign of the teachers, as a marginalised group, experiencing a feeling of resignation towards the contemporary Chinese schooling system. Perspectives towards this from the students or school management may well vary, which tells the particular and unique ways in which local people modify and interpret their complex social world.

In this case, the paradigm of constructivism and interpretivism looks appropriate as it prescribes to a social reality where individuals are not discrete, where other people may hold different subjective meanings of the same event or experience, and where local politics may affect how people interpret the situations they face in any particular case. Guba and Lincoln envision that in social research “the researcher is interactively linked to the object in the
study and the findings are literally created as the study proceeds” (1994, p. 111), the knowledge thereby created is through the research process itself as a result of interaction between the researcher and the participant in the situation;

In brief in a certain sense, a school is a school. However, there are limitations. Just as the way in which one looks determines what one can see, the researcher’s perception of the nature of reality to an extent determines the truth-seeking and knowledge-generating process that ensues. The endeavour to understand and make sense out of the schooling experience of the participants, that is, the knowledge thereby created is culturally derived and is historically situated interpretations of the social life-world (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Knowledge in social science, therefore, is not fixed, but likely to be socially, individually and contingently constructed, and it emerges from people’s social practices. Schools from the West to the East can legitimately be viewed as similar – i.e. subject to the same observation method. But they are also culturally unique and demand that the researcher acknowledge this.

Returning to the problem of how to look and what to see, the problem itself indicates the differing angles taken by positivism and constructivism or post-positivism: with objectively existing reality and universally unified truth as the inquiring target, one denies value pluralism and seeks the truth which is authoritatively defined; with reality and truth taken as socially, historically, culturally and even personally constructed, one embraces value pluralism and seeks differing interpretations of social events. This view lays the cornerstone for the research and determines what one is willing to see and whose voice to raise.

However, maintaining value pluralism demands a politically neutral stance from the inquirer. Political neutrality itself can be taken as a challenge to the political in certain circumstances. This gives rise to the next problem: the climate of Chinese Social Science Inquiry and its concurrent issues.

12.2. Chinese Social Science Inquiry (CSSI) against Methodological Individualism

“Have you ever felt that you were deceived by our government? I mean those policies for the laid off workers?” I probe. He laughs dryly but turns circumspect around my being critical to the government.

Deceptive? That is your word, I say nothing....
We are all alert to people like you, I mean people holding a notebook and a pen and a smartphone... And besides, we were notified not to talk with any outsiders and media people without permission from the superior. (A School Gatekeeper, Chapter Nine)

These are data from the field indicating that the “researcher” is seen as a potential “troublemaker” who seems “daunting” and “terrifying”. The interpretation behind these data can be rich, for example: the gradual loss of basic trustworthiness and credibility in social life as a consequence of an unprincipled money chasing trend brought on by socio-economic reform; the local school’s difficult survival in the crevice created by the public cries of discontent and the partiality endorsed by social media against today’s education; the gulf between academic and practitioner in the field of education, etc. They all contribute to the climate for Chinese social science inquiry (CSSI), and what demands the most attention here is the strong political tone which is apparent: the faith and loyalty toward the Party, the State or authority. This may also decisively influence the inquiry process.

What follows gives an overview of the political aspect of social inquiry in China.

12.2.1. CSSI and political loyalty

CSSI has its own dominant force: investigative research/调查研究 (IR). Hsiung (2015) has identified the mechanisms in CSSI and her work shows that besides the quantitative and the qualitative approaches, which are usually the case in the Western countries and which are both introduced by Western-trained scholars into China, CSSI has been dominated by a third approach: IR. This point was verified when Jingping Xi, China’s current President and General Secretary of the CCP, stated that IR should be routinely carried out by rank-and-file bureaucrats (Xi, 2011).

Claimed to contain Chinese socialist characteristics (GAO, 1987), IR was introduced by Mao Zedong in the 1920s and was used extensively during the Great Leap Forward (1958-1962, GLF). IR has a powerful influence in CSSI because of the strong methodology advocated by Mao: the importance of building rapport among inquirer and participants, the relationship between theory and practice and the generalisability of case studies. For the researcher-researched relationship, Mao (1986, p. 24) claimed that unless investigators were perceived as enthusiastic, humble and willing to learn, they would not be able to carry out adequate investigative work and gain an insider perspective. He recommended for the inquirer, therefore, the three principles of “togetherness/三同 with the researched”: eating together, living together and learning/working together; these work for building a sense of camaraderie.
For the theory-practice relationship, Mao endorsed an ethnographic fieldwork position and had famously asserted in 1930 that “no investigation, no right to speak/没有调查，就没有发言权” (1982, p. 13). This demands that inquirers do not rely on existing written reports and instead they should, in research terms, immerse themselves in a local site over a long period to gain a view from the midst of the issue under study (Mao, 1986, p. 27). For the generalisability of case studies, Mao drew analogically upon two Chinese sayings to illustrate this concept: “Small as the sparrow is, it possesses all its internal organs—small but complete/麻雀虽小，五脏俱全”, and “All crows under the sun are black/天下乌鸦一般黑”. He argued that it was unnecessary to study the “big sparrow, small sparrow, Chinese sparrow and foreign sparrow”—as “the dissection of one sparrow provides information about all birds, an investigator only needs to study one example to understand the essence of related issues” (Mao, 1964, p. 20).

At first glance, IR resembles the general principles of social science research in that it relies on in-depth interviews and ethnographic fieldwork. However, unlike QR, it is not based on a reflective and analytical framework; it instead, epistemologically speaking, fosters a hegemonic regime that is particularly detrimental to critical QR because unchecked official discourse is widely employed (Hsiung, 2015 July). Hsiung drew this conclusion through a scrutinised study of the local political and historical context where IR had been “employed in conjunction with Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideologies as a means to advance the CCP’s agenda in political struggles”. Having a legitimised and prominent position in Chinese social sciences in general, and in sociology in particular (Gao, 1987; Shen & Xia, 2006), IR tends to be a means of producing officially sanctioned knowledge in the Chinese academic world; its hegemonic status nowadays is institutionalised through the prominent and somewhat intimidating standing of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) as CCP’s think tank (Hsiung, 2015 July).

Xiangming Chen, another seasoned Chinese social science scholar, expressed the same concern (2016). She clarified that although China adopted a market economy more than 35 years ago, its administrative system remains bureaucratic; the government agencies display a preference for speculative and positivist research and do not use the findings from qualitative or constructivist inquiry because of its being subjective and unrepresentative. If the government agencies ever seek academic advice, they prefer short and succinct sketches of the trend in order to make quick policy decisions. Representatives from government agencies
are not interested in or have no time for reading long reports with thick descriptions and in-depth interpretations of the findings. Given that the CCP governments, at all levels across the nation, control the allocation of the majority of research funds (Chen, 2016, p. 74), and provide very little funding to research projects other than IR or QR, it is not difficult to imagine a situation where the dominant force of the CSSI pays its due political loyalty to CCP: many stories are told but with only one theme and many people talk but only one voice gets heard.

It is this ideological and political climate in CSSI that raises this question: how much room is there for the Chinese social inquirer to employ methodological individualism, originating from constructivism and interpretivism?

12.2.2. Methodological individualism and political neutrality

Out of a constructivist paradigm, the interpretivist methodology is heavily tinted with individualism. Having its own place in Western sociology and economics, the origins and development of ‘methodological individualism’ were comprehensively studied by Heath (2008) and Hodgson (2007). According to Weber, methodological individualism stipulates that “in sociological work these collectivities must be treated as solely the resultants and modes of organization of the particular acts of individual persons, since these alone can be treated as agents in a course of subjectively understandable action” (Weber, 1922, p. 13). I borrow the term ‘methodological individualism’ to indicate the three person-oriented dimensions in the methodology out of this evaluative case study in constructivism and interpretivism.

The first dimension is for the researcher’s Self. For this style of social inquiry, the self is expected to know who s/he is, in the sense of what values s/he holds and the origin of the interest in the research topic, before looking into the events and lives of others (Kushner, 2000). Hayek believed that methodological individualism “systematically starts from the concepts which guide individuals in their actions and not from the results of their theorizing about their actions”; it therefore encourages greater modesty with respect to social planning (Hayek, 1942, p. 286). Consequently, for research strategy, the Self decides how much the participant can assume the inquiring role; for an emergent research design, the Self decides in situ what to do next in the fieldwork; for data collection, the Self decides what to be included into the data set; for the research result, the Self decides whose voice counts most and whose knowledge is prioritised, and so forth. Stake’s view on how the Self draws conclusions is that
“ultimately the evaluator decides” and the Self “must rely on their (his/her) sense of what is good” (Stake, 1997, p. 474); therefore, the “judgment is dependent on the evaluator’s values and personality” (House, 2001, p. 28). Briefly, the nature of the research relies so heavily on the skills of the Self, the Self’s interpersonal skills (Simons, 1980) become critical in the research process; and the judgements and interpretations may come from the Self’s tacit knowledge and even intuition.

The second dimension comes from the participant’s perspective. Given that social life is constituted by individual human action, to understand social institutions and social change is to show how they arise as the result of the actions and interaction of individuals (Elster, 1982, p. 463). Ignoring the agent’s perspective, Hayek argued, can easily lead the inquirer to overestimate the Self’s powers of rational planning and control, and thus to fall into “rationalism”; by contrast, the central virtue of methodological individualism is that it helps to see the limitations of the inquirer’s reason (Hayek, 1944, p. 33). The main task of the Self is thus to collect different perspectives and values, presented through the personal portrayal of the particular participant. This can be “a minutely observed portrayal of the social setting in which the subject lives” (MacDonald, 1976) or a focus on the personalities and the goals, perceptions and values of the individual portrayed (Stake, 1972). This is meant not just for a better understanding of people in relation to organisational change, but also a reversed vision against the traditional quality judgement of a social programme: the quality of a programme should be more judged by its practitioners and not the outsiders or authorities.

The third dimension lies in integrating the reader into a generalising role. Constructivism advocates ceding high degrees of control over judgements (Kushner, 1996), including the generalisability judgement. For evaluative case study Stake advocates a shift of generalisation locus: it should not be claimed by the inquirers but instead, it should be recognised by readers. Stake named this as “naturalistic generalisation” (Stake, 1978, p. 7), and it can be achieved through “vicarious experience”, by “thick description” the audience can feel the inquirer’s fieldwork experience, and through this vicarious experience, readers recognise essential similarities which may be epistemologically in harmony with the reader’s experience and thus to that person a natural basis for generalisation (Stake, 1978, p. 5). Therefore, grounded in the reader’s own daily life, the reader assumes the responsibility of deciding whether the research report can add to his/her existing experience and humanistic understanding.
To this point I have depicted the existing CSSI climate and the methodological individualism employed in this study. The vision from methodological individualism may permit the social scientist to “accomplish something which is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals”, but entail political or ideological neutrality (Weber, 1922, p. 15). Western methodologies assume researcher independence; CSSI questions that.

For a self-financed inquiry project which will be assessed in a Western university, methodological individualism may not have much trouble; but the political tension it may arouse once applied in CSSI cannot be ignored. The politics involved in the applicability of Western methodology in CSSI seems well worthy of further exploration.

Apart from the contextual politics involved in methodological choice, cultural traits from the local context, 关系/guanxi (social connection), 人情/renqing (friendship or kinship) and 面子/mianzi (face) in Chinese social life for instance, also deserve to be highlighted in terms of ethics and validity in social inquiry, as they may have a critical role not just in the research findings but also in the process of data collection: the process of getting access to informants, obtaining their participation, gaining their trust and making sure their responses are earnest and truthful.

What follows is an examination of the previous research on how Chinese local traditions and cultures can influence social inquiry and more importantly, how ethics should be approached in the research where the Western protocol is applied.

12.3. The Local Context and Inquiry Ethics

When I had finished some of the writing up of the case study conducted in M Secondary School, my supervisor, a Western scholar, advised me that I should send the writing back, in order to go through a process of negotiation. Apart from the thinking of empowering the participant in the inquiry process, negotiation by responsive/democratic evaluative inquiry also works as a means for validation—my interpretation of the data from that school should go back to the people there to see how much they would agree with the world I reconstructed in the writing. Although this research protocol looks foreign according to my Chinese knowledge, I agree to try it out. Validity, after all, is essential to research. I contacted Han, the Deputy Principal who granted me the access for this research.
“I have finished some part of the writing; do you think you have time to give it a look?”

I text him first.

“Is it necessary? How about telling your supervisor that we have done this? I mean you are a PhD candidate and you know much more than I do; and I trust you,” he replies.

This was not unexpected, given my knowledge of Chinese context, but this immediately puts me in a dilemma: negotiation can be collaborative, but with local guanxi working well, it can be very manipulative as well. In essence, it is an ethical issue: in China, where renqing-guanxi (individual friendship or relationship) may override laws and regulations, how is the brittle boundary between negotiation and manipulation to be drawn?

12.3.1. Local context and foreign protocols

It has been noted that China is not yet a fully legalised society and government policies change quickly. Chen comments that with the unprecedentedly rapid social transformation, China does not have the assurance of the relative stability experienced or taken for granted in Western societies; thus, some major protocols that tend to work in law-governed Western society may not be applicable in the Chinese context (2016, pp. 75-78).

This very different Chinese context poses fundamental research issues and difficulties which may not be experienced and reported in the West. These include access to informants, willingness to discuss organisational issues openly and trustworthiness of the responses. Consequently, credibility of the findings becomes critical in inductive studies conducted in China. Failure to address these very carefully may lead to either a complete failure of the research project or non-significant and non-transferable flawed research findings (Peng & Nunes, 2008).

Hsiung’s work (2015, 2016) has addressed the problem with a different perspective: with QR theories resting firmly upon the Anglo-American heritage, the Chinese QR inquirer can be easily trapped in a situation where conflict exists between upholding Chinese traditions on the one hand and applying Western knowledge on the other. The situation is that the local scholars are expected to refer the Western theories to justify their work. Not surprisingly, as one Chinese scholar notes, “Chinese experiences are relegated as the footnotes of Western theories” (Cao, 2011). But ignoring these specific traits of Chinese culture is like “trimming toes to fit the shoes” (Hsiung, 2001), which causes miscommunication and misinterpretations from both the researcher and the informant. What could be even worse is that the uncritical
use of imported theory will simultaneously render support to, rather than challenging the local hegemonic discourse which is known to either blame individuals for social problems or use stereotypes to explain social problems in social science enquiry (Hsiung, 2015).

Zhou and Nunes (2013) highlight the importance of addressing the potential issues out of the Chinese local traditions and cultures for social inquiries. Drawing on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, Zhou and Nunes (2013) believe that 关系/guanxi (social connection), 人情/renqing (friendship or kinship) and 面子/mianzi (face) can heavily influence the interpretation of both the behaviour and the preconceptions of the interview participants involved in a research project in China. They concluded that although some methodology, grounded theory for instance, can be applicable in different cultural contexts, the culture itself may present challenges and barriers at both data collection and analysis stages. These cultural problems may hinder interaction with informants, cause misunderstanding of responses and behaviours and thus significantly impair research validity and reliability.

This rich literature indicates the scholars’ awareness of addressing the concurrent issues of applying Western theories, including of methodological theories, in a non-Western context: the local cultures and traditions will substantially affect social inquiry if foreign theories are applied uncritically to analyse Chinese cases.

Unfortunately, ethical issues have rarely been raised.

12.3.2. Ethics: situational and personal

In this study, I see no problem managing the documents or protocols that the Western research method demands: the Participant Information Sheet, the Consent Form, or a faculty meeting to introduce my research, and a negotiation process. But would it be ethical that I manage the negotiation, probably with guanxi resources, for the benefit of the study?

The willingness to engage in a negotiation process with stakeholders has been taken as an approach to acknowledge stakeholder needs and recognising the political nature of the evaluative inquiry (Cronbach et al., 1980; Chelinsky, 1995, 1987; Greene, 1990; House, 1993, 1980; Palumbo, 1987; Patton, 1987, 1997; Weiss, 1987, 1997), but culturally China is a collectivist country (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 89) where there is a significant power distance in daily life (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005, p. 43) and thereby the concept of negotiation connotes differently. I then face the age-old question: if the end can be well justified, will the means matter?
Ethical issues are not new to social researchers and there has always been unanimous agreement that unethical behaviour should be avoided. But along with incorporating democratic values of justice, fairness and respect for privacy of persons and public knowledge, ethical principles become abstract, and it is not always obvious how they should be applied in given situations.

Increasingly, professional associations have also written guidelines to facilitate ethical practice. To be justifiable as an ethical practice, some suggest the ultimate resource is one’s own conscience; some aspire to set standards to judge the quality of the research; others are couched in terms of codes and rules; yet others prefer statements of principle which offer guidance for ethical decision-making and a basis from which possible codes and rules might be developed. For example, Soltis (1990) suggests an issue or situation should be considered from three different perspectives: that of the researcher, the profession and the public, noting the different dilemmas that occur for each. Newman and Brown (1996) offer a framework for ethical decision-making that includes intuition, rules and codes, principles and theory, personal values and beliefs and action, listing a few questions to ask of oneself in regard to each.

Even scholars from the same camp can barely achieve conformity in ethics codes and rules. Perspectives from Eisner and MacDonald can exemplify. Eisner (1991) raised the question of whether consent can be informed, or whether the pursuit of knowledge should be so important that it can override the immediate interest of the studied. MacDonald showed concern about how to protect the individual’s right as the portrayal of persons increases the possibility of control of those persons. Faced with these sticky ethical tensions, they developed different coping strategies. Eisner takes a “utilitarian or consequentialist position”, arguing that we may live in a life full of deceptions and manipulations. Ideals in coping with ethical issues are, therefore, always somewhat out of reach, thereby becoming some small or kind deceptions, or, for example, fake friendship in the fieldwork, should be accepted. People do not like the idea of using others as a means to their own professional ends, but once they embark upon a research study, they virtually assure that they will use others for public good (Eisner, 1991, p. 226). Barry MacDonald and his colleagues disagree slightly. They advise social inquirers to be thoughtful towards the concomitant social consequences of personal disclosure. Finding the balance between the individual’s right to privacy and the public’s right to know was diagnosed by Jenkins as “a paradox” at the heart of democratic inquiry.
(1974). Faced with this paradox, MacDonald and Walker called for negotiation, both procedurally and methodologically.

What worsens the situation is that even when there is certain congruent thinking, there is often the problem of varying interpretation (Simons, 2014). For example, although treating participants “fairly and equally” is written into the Human Rights Act and is now a legal imperative, it still remains an ethical issue, because the interpretation of “treating fairly” varies.

Given the Chinese cultures and tradition involved in the study, I believe “situated ethics” to be a germane theoretical framework, because it makes more sense that ethical practice should depend on how the principles are interpreted and enacted in the precise socio-political context of the research (Kushner, 2000; Piper & Simons, 2005; Simons & Usher, 2000). By prioritising the context of ethical practice and experience, this approach values relationships, people’s lives and context, which echoes the ethical discourse of social justice (House, 1993) and the redistribution of power in research and evaluation relationships (MacDonald, 1976).

Briefly, ethical principles are abstract and it is not always obvious how they should be applied in given situations. Since some ethical problems may arise from conflicts among principles and the necessity of trading one against the other, “balancing of such principles in concrete situations is the ultimate ethical act” (House, 1993, p. 168). Thinking ethically, therefore, needs to be responsive to issues or questions identified by stakeholders, who often have different values and interests in the expected outcomes and appreciate different perspectives of the programme in action (Simons, 2014, p. 459). This ethical approach also helps to nurture a positive relationship between researcher and participants, for it encourages participants to develop their own ethical practice in the groups and contexts in which they work and an ethics which takes into account the specific cultural differences between people (Piper & Simons, 2005, p. 59; Simons, 2006).

Returning to the study, there are many “ethical moments” (Usher, 2000): when, without the “guidance” from the head teacher, the students involved returned the PIS and CF unsigned, I take it as ethical to keep them unsigned instead of having them signed with the head teacher’s help. Having sat in the Teachers’ Office for over one month, I have collected rich data from talking with and observing people in the office. I have decided not to use them as I cannot be sure about the blurred boundary between when they see me as a friend and when as a researcher. Several interviews with the teachers seem to be revealing in relation to the hidden
problems of Chinese schooling, but I cannot use them as I cannot promise confidentiality and, therefore, cannot predict what impact the people involved will face once I include their responses in my writing, and also because they usually spoke more than they had expected to. I had interviewed ten individual students and finally decided to include Jiao’s and Gao’s stories, because I believe they are the most marginalised in China.

Those decisions are all ones that I can make, but more remain unsolved. For example: to conduct the study as an outsider or insider, which could be more ethical? Specifically, once I have detected some pedagogical problem or some mistake on the part of the classroom teacher, should I tell it, or not? Should I interfere, or not, if the individual student shares his suffering from family violence? If caught in a teacher-student problem, how should I proceed? After I had sat for a week in the Teachers’ Office and talked with those who were willing, the teachers tended to ignore my existence as a researcher and share with me some of their problems of daily life; in this case, how much ownership can I claim over the data and can it be ethical?

Given the uncertainty and complexity in case study fieldwork, I have experienced many “ethical moments”, but the most difficult one was when the Deputy Principal did not seem willing to read the case report I wrote for his school. I chose to respect his decision and Chinese tradition, but it brought forth two questions: first, given that the protocol of negotiation was initiated to empower the participant, what if the participant declines this empowerment? Second, without going through negotiation, how should I achieve validity in the research?

I do not have the capacity to answer the first question, but I must face the second.

12.4. Validity and Generalisation

If in life some event occurs but no existing (Western) theory can explain its cause and effect, will it be valid to include this in the study report? An example in point is the Family Planning Service Certificate included as a compulsory condition for schooling. If many techniques and skills, once employed, can influence and affect the study result, which would seem more valid: controlled study or naturalistic study? Regarding ethics and validity: which should be prioritised in social inquiry?
12.4.1. Validity: truth, beauty and justice

Validity has been a contested concept because there are disputes about its meaning, how it should be pursued, its relevance to research inquiry and its intelligibility in the face of postmodern or anti-foundational critiques of traditional research; it is, therefore, helpful to give a brief overview on the development of its usage in social inquiry before I provide the justification for my research validity.

The term ‘validity’ was a concept borrowed from the field of tests and measurement by Campbell and Stanley (1966) to lay a conceptual framework for assessing the quality of various research methods. They applied this concept to experimental design in order to indicate the equivocality or validity of the findings. Originally, the world was divided into two types of validity: ‘internal’ and ‘external’. The former refers to the credibility of the causal relationship between treatment programme and outcome, while the latter is concerned with the generalisability of that relationship to other persons, locations, programmes and outcome measures.

Scholars later made attempts to apply the concept of validity associated with quantitative research to the design and practice of qualitative research (LeCompte & Goetz, 1982; Evans, 1983; Yin, 1984), but these attempts have yet to show the operational relevance to case study, ethnographic or naturalistic inquiry. Internal validity, being a rigorous experimental approach towards social inquiry, was then criticised when the constructivist or interpretive position emerged during the period of 1970 to 1987 (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Part of the problem concerns a failure to recognise that the nature of naturalistic constructivism inquiry is markedly different from experimental design. The constructivists believe in pluralistic, interpretive, open-ended and contextualised perspectives toward reality, and it has been well documented that when a social practice or programme is put into action, it is usually adapted by different people in a different setting. Consequently, most of the conventional constructs of validity are inappropriate for naturalistic forms of inquiry as they stress control over variables which greatly undermine and limit the application of social research conclusions.

This dispute calls for a reappraisal of the meaning and use of validity concepts. In its most rudimentary form, validity refers to the reasons people need to have for believing claims of truth, what Dewey called “warranted assertibility” (Phillips, 1987). Thus, validity is related to truth. Given that truth from a constructivism perspective, however you cut it, is an essentially contested concept. There is little agreement about what constitutes the right basis for truth-
seeking activities, one way to think about validity, therefore, “is not so much cutting the
difference between truth and its pretenders, but providing us with a sense of the limitations of
knowledge claims” (Norris, 2005, pp. 439-443). In the words of Patti Lather, validity is

This does not mean, however, that “anything goes”. A study by Creswell and Miller (2000)
has shown that multiple perspectives about the validity of qualitative inquiry exist in the
literature (Cronbach, (1980); House, 1980; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam,
1998; Schwandt, 1997; Altheide & Johnson, 1994; Lather, 1993; Maxwell, 1992). As a result,
there are a confusing array of terms for validity, including authenticity, goodness,
verisimilitude, adequacy, trustworthiness, plausibility, validity, validation and credibility.
Various authors have constructed diverse typologies of validity for qualitative inquiry (e.g.,
Maxwell’s five types, 1992; Lather’s four frames, 1993; and Schwandt’s four positions,
1997). For example, Donmoyer (1996), writing an editorial on validity in the Educational
Researcher, commented on the diverse perspectives of validity by contrasting Miles and
(p. 21).

It is important to include this background because, in a sense, what I endeavour to achieve is
work on the validation of evaluative case study in a Chinese context: as Chinese scholars
develop qualitative inquiry (QI) and join the global conversation in QI development, we will
also have to confront of the issue of validity. To scaffold for validity in this situation
demands a keen awareness of the politics of knowledge in this global development of QI and
the idiosyncrasy of China’s local context. This background informs the selection of the
validity theory of House (1980), who wrote about validity in qualitative evaluative inquiry at
a time when the qualitative case study methods were provoking controversy.

Together with other scholars, Cronbach and his colleagues (1980) for instance, House gave
profile to the claim to external validity. To defy internal validity in social inquiry, House
drew on the case of the drug company; drug companies have gained control of many aspects
of drug evaluations, from study design and data analysis to publication. There are a dozen
ways, House stated, in which drug evaluations have been manipulated to produce findings
favourable to the companies, who stand to make billions of dollars on the basis of study
results (House, 2008). Based on naturalistic or constructivist epistemologies, House (1980)
clarifies that, in place of technical validity, evaluative case study researchers should go for
notions of inter-subjective agreement, plausibility, undeniability and credibility. This found immediate acclaim and came to stand alongside the work on validity carried out by Donald Campbell, who himself was outlining the severe limits to statistical validity (Campbell, 1999, pp. 77-106.) and seeking to acknowledge the shift to external validity (Campbell, 1999, pp. 111-122).

House later summarised three properties for external validity as “Truth, Beauty and Justice”. He reduced “Truth” to “plausibility”: the study had to be at least plausible to participants. As “truth” in the world of practice is too contestable, it also raises the issue of ethics. A perfectly designed study that coerced people into accepting a version of truth and ignored controversies is, by that very act, unethical. “Beauty” stands for, crudely, the aesthetic properties of the study: by essence the coherence of the narrative that allowed proper and accessible representation of the practices under scrutiny. Finally, “Justice” referred to the awareness in the study of social justice issues and people’s rights to be represented.

Returning to my case study, truth is achieved in this study for the following reasons. Firstly, the study is ethically conducted, with no coercion during the research process. Arising out of constructivism, this study sees reality as multifaceted and takes the stance of value pluralism; it aims to understand the social function of schooling from people’s real daily life, and the main job of the Self is, therefore, to collect perspectives and values from different stakeholders. The research is participant-centred and is led, not by any preset, concrete research questions, but by the progressive focus from the participants involved. Additionally, being a self-financed PhD research project, the conflict of interests from different stakeholders have been substantially minimised. Thus, coercion does not necessarily exist.

This study is true also because of the bias revelation. When reflecting on the origin of his validity framework thirty years later, House (2014) highlighted the issue of researcher bias in evaluative inquiry, thinking that the Self’s bias apparently affects their decision while examining the “conflicts of interest”. This issue has been addressed in two ways here. Firstly, as made clear at the start of the thesis, through the nature of the study, the Self is supposed to serve as an instrument through which the reader can experience the study process and the first task thereby becomes self-reflexivity through prudent introspection. Secondly, the Self’s bias has been neutralised through exposing the Self’s action and reaction in detail during the fieldwork, through thick description, inclusive of the inner world struggle during the
interview for instance, mainly in the hope that the reader, when forming their own judgements, can be informed of the possible personal bias on the part of the researcher.

This study is coherent. Although there are fragments of writing about events and anecdotes which seem irrelevant to one another, this should be taken as evidence for the social inquiry fieldwork being complex, chaotic and even messy. Certain patterns, however, emerge behind the seemingly unconnected events: for example, behind the local primary school’s enrolment policies and Jiao’s story stands China’s State Will and educational inequality; behind the quantised schooling report and the faculty meeting about the coming pinggu is the tightly controlled and highly centralised criteria for quality in education; behind the flag-raising ceremony and the Lounge anecdotes a certain ideology and hegemony are at work. In brief, all the fragments contribute to one coherent theme: the hidden curriculum in today’s Chinese schooling and how to view them.

Last, and most important, is the justice duly appealed for in the study. Drawing on Rawls’s justice theory (Rawls, 1971), House (1991, 1993) argues that evaluation is never value neutral; it should tilt in the direction of social justice by specifically addressing the needs and interests of the powerless. One of the evaluative inquirer’s tasks is to understand the needs and positions of various stakeholder groups, especially the poor and powerless. In essence, to call for justice in social research demands the researcher to cast themselves in the role of spokespeople or representatives of the poor and powerless. Specifically, in this study, if the local school principals are the powerless, compared with those who make the schooling policies in China, the teaching staff, the gatekeepers and the individual students are the least advantaged in the present-day Chinese educational system, and this study has spared no effort in publicising the troubles of their daily lives, seeing the schooling function in relation to their needs; their voices have been treated with the utmost importance.

By embracing “truth, beauty and justice” in this research, I am confident that this study is valid.

12.4.2. Generalisation: The universality out of the singular

To generalise means to make inferences or make a general statement about the likelihood that a finding established in one case or setting has significance in another or to another person. Generalisation raises two basic problems: what kind of knowledge is to be generated and how? The answers rely on several features of the current study design.
Firstly, residing in the naturalistic and constructivist paradigm, this research, as demonstrated in the first section, is practice-led, not theory-led. This has two aims: one is about curriculum study and the other is about research practice. For curriculum study, the study aims to better the inefficiency of educational inquiry in facilitating change through improvement in practice (Stake & Trumbull, 1982), for changes in educational practice often preceded rather than followed the findings of educational research (Eisner, 1984). For research practice, it aims to ameliorate Chinese social inquiry practice, as it is essential to record locally grounded inquiry practice. This demands a bottom-up approach informed by local methodologies, epistemologies and research practices (Hsiung, 2015). In its nature, this study endeavours to apply principles and methods developed by theory to a world that has not always been carefully examined by theory, a world of complex, chaotic, continually moving programme or policy contexts, a world of people and places that are often different with respect to tradition, social characteristics and patterns of behaviour. With these said, this study demands a focus on experiential knowledge from both the participants and the researcher.

Secondly, this research demands the centrality of humanity and context. Essentially, this is a study on people’s real-life schooling experience focused on the interaction among the political, economic policies and schooling cultures. For humanity, as Reynolds stated, with individualities, “human beings have to do what, theoretically, they ought not to do, and leave undone those things they ought to do. They are even said to possess souls—untrustworthy things beyond the reach of sociologists” (1908, preface). For the research context, taking China for example, although having political unity, the dramatic regional difference in terms of economy, culture and tradition in China presents a situation where each and every naturalistic and constructivist study will be unique.

These features require an alternative framework for generalisation other than the conventional framework based on sampling theory. The traditional sampling theory, in essence, utilises large samples and statistical procedures with a logic that assumes regularities in the social world that allow cause and effect to be determined. This procedure showed its restricted nature for generalisation (Donmoyer, 1990) for single-case studies from the naturalistic and constructivist paradigm. Fortunately, a group of case study scholars have contributed productively to the thinking that the way in which one generalises from a case is different to that adopted in traditional forms of social science research (Donmoyer, 1990; Eisner, 1984; Flyvberg, 2006; Simons, 1980, 1996, 2014, 2015; Stake, 1967; Stake & Trumbull, 1982).
Given the nature of the research, two theories have been chosen to build the generalisation in this study: naturalistic generalisation of Stake and Trumbull (1982), and seeing the universality from the singular from Simons (2015).

Stake gives full attention to experiential knowledge of the practitioners: Stake argues that the practitioner’s “self-generated knowings” should be highly valued although tacit, implicit and personalistic, because practice is guided far more by personal knowings based on and gleaned from personal experience. Also aiming to ameliorate the situation where the new knowledge produced by large-scale projects or esoteric theorists seems to have little use in people’s daily lives, Stake proposes combining “knowledge production”, “utilisation” and “dissemination” into one through evaluative inquiry with democracy. Out of these concerns Stake advocated naturalistic generalisation (1978), by collecting personal experiential data to generate knowledge through raising the practitioner’s voice, and by inviting the audience’s vicarious experience to generalise, grounded in their own daily practical experience. This actually challenges both the author and the reader: the author should provide report with thick description as a means for a vicarious experience to help readers discern what is similar and dissimilar to their own context. To enable this recognition requires the reader’s agency.

Simons focuses on seeing the universal significance in the particular case (Simons, 1996, 2009, 2015; Simons & McCormack, 2007). Simons explains that the more you capture the particulars of one person, context, programme, policy, its context and circumstance, the more likely you are to discover something universal. Context of one case, for Hyatt and Simons (1999), is not simply a location or static description of time, place and circumstance. Instead, there are several conceptions and levels: a cultural context infused with different norms and assumptions; a political context inclusive of different interests and values; a personal context of key people and roles; a subject context of its history and focus; a policy context to explore how and why this particular programme or policy emerged at this time; a broader societal context which may constitute an external influence or pressure on the case. It is through representing the dynamics within and between these levels of contexts that the inquirer strives for a holistic understanding. It is these dynamics, once well portrayed, preferably visually to get beyond linear description, that enable users of evaluative social inquiry to generalise to their own contexts or apprehend the generality of the finding (Simons, 2015, p. 178).
Returning to the current study, the knowledge generated lies in both the content and form of research: various types of relationships and research experience. Substantially, out of this one case study, it is the variety of relationships involved in the study, although “locked in time and circumstance” that “communicates enduring truths about the human condition” (MacDonald & Walker, 1975, p. 3). This includes not just the collision and cooperation among the political, the economical and the schooling cultural spheres, but also confliction and collaboration among the researcher, the participants and the research. Methodologically, it is the fieldwork experience that becomes universal. It is the experience of exploring ways to look and what to see in social inquiry, of inwardly studying oneself, or searching for the boundary of data, and the boundary of Western theories in the Chinese context, of seeking the situational ethics, and an alternative framework for validity and generalisation.

Carried out in some other school in another city by a different inquirer, the case will have different participants and a different set of data. With different personal experience, the researcher may take on a different ontological and epistemological stance, the results of this study would subsequently vary, too. But the relationship and research experience, although quite personal and although captured through an in-depth and holistic study of only one school in contemporary China, tell universal themes and principles.

Jiao’s case can serve as an example here: the life story of each left-behind child varies in terms of time, space and family background; but what can be generalised from Jiao’s experience is the interplay among the current schooling policies, the regional disparity engendered by economic reform, the individual’s birthplace, and how this interplay produces the exacerbating social equality and justice in today’s China. Moreover, if given a second read of Gao’s schooling experience, what can be generalised from this individual case seems more universal if focused on the relationship involved: it is the interplay among the parents, the school life and the growth of individual student. In more detail, it is how the society malfunctions for the growth of youth in the similar situation that can be generalisable here: the physical violence from not-well-educated parents, the cold violence from the classroom teacher, the dreary school life, and consequently a 17-year-old loser.

To summarise, following an emergent research design, this methodological discussion can only come at the final stage of research: it is not what I planned to do before I entered the fieldwork but what I have done in the field. Starting with ontology and epistemology, this chapter first explains why the constructivist-interpretivist stance is deployed in the research.
Residing in constructivism, the evaluative social inquiry demands a personally constructed methodology—by another term, methodology individualism—which encourages political neutrality. This, unfortunately, does not seem to conform with the climate in CSSI which requires political loyalty. Political tension is not the only challenge from the Chinese context; given that ethical principles can be very abstract and the local cultures and traditions always play a critical role in social inquiry, I argue that ethics should also be situated. Lastly, because this is not a conventional study, some unconventional methods for validity and generalisation are explored after a brief overview of the traditional validity and generalisation frameworks. For validity, this study follows House’s principle of truth, beauty and justice, and for generalisation, Stake’s naturalistic generalisation and Simons’ universality from the particular.

**Conclusion**

I started this research with a desire to understand what seemed to be a bewildering array of changes brought about by the reforms in contemporary mainland China, notably the injurious situation for youth development and inequality in education resulting from a dramatically accentuated social stratification. This provided the base for one of the research themes: how the school in today’s China functions to socialise our youth for differentiated futures. As I embarked on this PhD programme I was guided into a Western sociology of education, and with this I became absorbed in methodology more than theory. This was mainly for the difference between the Western and the Eastern world cultures. With concerns arising out of the politics of knowledge, I have been sceptical towards the legitimacy of applying methodologies established in a foreign culture into the Chinese context. Hence, my research expanded and became a self-critical evaluative inquiry on how to interpret schooling’s social function in today’s China: to be concrete, it is exploring the applicability of CBEI (case-based evaluative inquiry) in the CSSI (Chinese social science inquiry) dominated by IR (investigative research).

This is a case study with an evaluative perspective, and it was conducted in one secondary school located in M City in southeast China, which has experienced a most dramatic transformation instigated by Chinese recent reforms. The fieldwork lasted for 16 weeks, about half a Chinese school year, and the fieldwork data sources can be categorised generally as observation, observation-based interview and documentation. We come to know school
through how people reveal their experience, and how others come to read about that experience—knowledge is socially constructed, which is, of course, the core belief of the Constructivists. Case study researchers facilitate the expression of actors in the case, but also assist readers in their own (re)construction of case knowledge. The case researcher emerges from one social experience, her fieldwork, to choreograph another, the report. Hence the case report was composed as an aid for the reader, not just to see the research process, or the intelligence involved, but also the possible bias from the researcher.

What is the case here was not pre-set, before the fieldwork was carried out; rather, it was discovered at the end of research journey. The logic here was to have practice rather than theory taking the lead—practice in terms of both school curriculum and the research process itself. If we allow the research process to ‘discover’ the case boundary—what is this a case of—we are forced to back away from theory in favour of theorising. Accordingly, the research adopted an emergent design; that is, the boundary exploration of the case followed understanding that emerged and accumulated in the research field. The evaluative aspect followed the tradition of responsive evaluation (established in the United States in late 1960s) and democratic evaluation (established in the United Kingdom in early 1970s), which encourages the norms of power sharing between the researcher and the participant. This ethos was taken as appropriate in that it allows space for concerns regarding the growth of Chinese inchoate sociology of education, bearing in mind the politics of knowledge in this global era. To highlight what became its relevance, this method admitted the centrality of local context and raised the voice of practitioners.

The first research theme: schooling and social stratification

For the first research theme, the significance of understanding how Chinese schools fulfil their social task lay in the role schooling is playing in the emergence of new forms of relationships in the workplace, and in society and politics in an era of globalisation where China emerges as a world power. The research came to make transparent the possible failures in redistributing social resources in a Chinese context and the possible causes for the majority of the labour force being reticent and docile when faced with inequality in life. It will, perhaps, benefit not only the decision-maker in curriculum reform by revealing curriculum impact at the macro-social level, but it may also prove useful to management in schooling institutions, as well as teaching staff, students and parents through what Stake and Trumbull (1980) have called naturalistic generalisation. Furthermore, this knowledge of how Chinese
schooling works helps envisage the influence on the world labour market by Chinese mass labour force.

Under the heading of ‘hidden curriculum’, the study endeavours to follow an alternative method of viewing school’s social function in contemporary China. Being amorphous as a concept, hidden curriculum functions in many ways; led by data from the classroom and school campus, the analysis in this study targeted how Chinese schools react to and get the students prepared for the dramatic changes in the spheres of politics, economy and ideology in today’s Chinese society. Three theories have been generated here.

The first theory which arises out of the case is about the schooling inequality initiated by the State: by relating the enrolment policies in local primary schools to the case of left-behind children, the analysis shows that having hukou within the schooling enrolment policies highlights the power that the State can exert in China, particularly in the case of schooling inequality waged by institutional policies.

The second theory is about meritocratic ideology. This quest was triggered by the image of the hard-working ‘losers’ in Chinese society and the quantised schooling inspection report. Supported by previous research, the analysis first pinpointed the fact that gaokao meritocracy has become a strong ideology in China, and then an in-depth investigation was carried out to reveal how this meritocracy, facilitated by the quantised schooling assessment mechanism, works favourably for disguising the inequality incurred in concomitance with the new social stratification induced by economic reform. Schooling meritocracy helps only to hide the unequal distribution of educational resource and invites the individuals to take the blame for their not being successful in schooling life in China.

The third theory is about the disconnection between reform and the reality it comes up against, through the reactions of the people caught up. How the school prepared for the upcoming National Evaluation of Balanced Development of Compulsory Education reveals the existing gap between reform policies and life reality; the cultural collectivism and the ideological narrative of the “socialist patriotism” and “basic reality of the country” help subject people to what they experience as a demoralising reform. In sum, what emerges is that today’s public ordinary schooling in China serves more as a controlling instrument than as an emancipatory institution or as an instrument of social mobility, and it seems the will from the State.

Second research theme: the salience of Western models of method
For the second research theme, this study is also constructivist in methodological terms. Methodology decides how the study will be conducted through method and explains the logic of the relationship between the researcher’s ontological and epistemological thinking and her/his research strategy. The significance of examining the methodology behind the CBEI model lies in the situation where while Chinese society has seen dramatic socio-economic changes, and many disciplines such as sociology and educational sociology in mainland China remain at a rudimentary stage. It is legitimate that Chinese scholars can learn, for example from the more advanced Western theories in the field of educational sociology, when looking at social phenomena, such as societal stratification, inequality in schooling access and the school’s social function. Even so, Chinese society is distinct from Western society in terms of history, tradition, culture, politics, and we must continue to question the applicability of research methods and methodologies established within Western culture. This background encourages thinking for methodological indigenisation, and four key aspects of curriculum research methodology have been discussed.

The first aspect is the researcher’s ontology and epistemology, from which a research methodology always finds its roots. Relying on the nature of this research and fieldwork evidence, this study above all explores the appropriateness of the Constructivist view of the nature of reality and truth: social reality seems no less locally and personally constructed than in Western contexts, based on the individual’s accounts of it through reporting daily action and interaction. In a certain sense, a school is a school is a school. However, there are limitations. Just as the way in which one looks determines what one can see, the researcher’s perception of the nature of reality to an extent determines the truth-seeking and knowledge-generating process that ensues. The endeavour to understand and make sense out of the schooling experience of the participants, that is, the knowledge thereby created, is culturally derived and is a historically situated interpretation of the social life-world (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Knowledge in social science, therefore, is not fixed, but likely to be socially, individually and contingently constructed, and it emerges from people’s social practices. Schools from the West to the East can legitimately be viewed as similar; that is, subject to the same observation method. But they are also culturally unique and demands researcher acknowledgement.

The second aspect is the personalised methodology/methodological individualism and power-sharing ethos adopted in this study; that is, CBEI in social research is inevitably personal and political. Through a critical lens, this methodological ethos does not seem to be working well
within the climate of Chinese social science inquiry (CSSI). Other scholars have detected that the CSSI has been dominated by the school of Investigatory Research (IR); when viewed in a historical context where IR originated and developed, IR actually demands the investigator(s) be politically faithful to the Chinese Communist Party. While arising out of constructivism-interpretivism, personalising methodology does pay due respect to individuals involved in social inquiry, encouraging the power-sharing ethos and political neutrality. This does not seem to be working harmoniously within the climate of CSSI that encourages political loyalty. Western methodologies assume researcher independence; CSSI questions that.

The third aspect is that of ethics in exercising Western protocols of doing social research in China. It is not new that all people recognise some common ethical norms, but they interpret, apply and balance them in different ways in light of their own values and life experiences. Ethical issues were accentuated in this study when certain Western research protocols ran into problems in the Chinese local context, the process of “negotiation” or “respondent validation” being the best examples here. Given the fact that failure to address the local cultural or traditional idiosyncrasies carefully may lead to either a failure of the research project or flawed research findings, I argue for “situated ethics” as a germane principle in this study. This principle is in accord with the centrality of context in the research, and it endorses that ethical practice should depend on how the principles are interpreted and enacted in the precise socio-political context of the research.

The last aspect discussed is of paramount importance for this research: the validity and generalisability of this CBEI. The origin and conventional practice of the terms ‘validity’ and ‘generalisation’ in social science were reviewed and justification for the framework adopted here was provided. This study is valid in that it achieved House’s criteria of “truth, beauty and justice”. Firstly, the research has ‘truth’ (plausibility)—in that it is ethically conducted, with no coercion during the research process, and it also reveals the researcher’s personal bias to the reader. Secondly, it is coherent (it has ‘beauty’) in that all seemingly irrelevant events and anecdotes contribute to one coherent theme: the hidden curriculum in today’s Chinese schooling and how to interpret this. Lastly, following Rawls’s justice theory, this study tilted in the direction of social justice by specifically addressing the needs and interests of the powerless: the individual students, the classroom teacher, the school gatekeeper and the school management.
In terms of generalisation, this study explored the ‘science of the singular’—how and what to generalise from a sample consisting of one case. Naturalistic generalisation, of Stake and Trumbull (1982), and seeing the universality from the singular, from Simons (2015), are the linchpins of this practice. As a Chinese saying goes, “Small as it is, the sparrow has all the vital organs”. Although this case study was locked in time and circumstance, it still can convey enduring themes about the human condition: it is the experience of the diverse and dynamic relationship involved in the study that is generalisable. This includes not just the collision and cooperation among the political, the economic and the schooling cultural spheres in terms of hidden curriculum study, but also the conflict and collaboration among the researcher, the participants and the research programme in methodological thinking. The fieldwork experience, for example, can be seen as universal: the exploration of how to look and what to see in social inquiry; the practice of inwardly studying oneself; the empiricism of searching for the boundary of data, and the boundary of Western theories in the Chinese context; of seeking the situational ethics and an alternative framework for validity and generalisation. This research shows that CBEI can capture, not just moments, but mechanisms of change.

Limitations

Although productive in the terms I describe above, this research has its own limitations and issues. Above all, given my identity as a mother and classroom teacher, and for the limited resources available for this research, my inquiry focuses on the layer of Chinese modern society where the disadvantaged student experiences discouragement in relation to upward growth and progress through schooling. This is done through reflecting on how the macro socio-economic and socio-political interacts with schooling and how this is reflected in people’s daily experience in school. This study helps to see how a necessary compliant labour force is produced for the economic development of the modern Chinese society, but it is far from being sufficient to tell the whole story. If the case focus shifts to the group who are the emerging new elites, it is likely to produce a completely different version.

In other respects, in applying the CBEI model, I feel inexperienced in several ways. From the perspective of ontology and epistemology, brought up and educated in mainland China, I have not absorbed the rich cultural knowledge in the meaning of constructivism and interpretivism that underpins the method. Secondly, the complexity of the CBEI process seems overwhelming for the inexperienced. For example, not unlike that which a microscope
is for germ observation, the researcher self is the research instrument in this study; that is, the ‘self’ and ‘subjectivity’ are supposed to serve as a lens through which the reader can see and feel the fieldwork experience. One of the issues I would raise here is the boundary between personal life and academic life; to be specific, since friendship and guanxi were employed to do the study, how is the researcher to set the line of difference distinguishing a conversation between friends and interview? Thirdly, out of the need for portrayal with thick description, the data for CBEI seems omnipresent, which is formidable as there are no clear rules following the emergent research design—everything seems to be data. Faced with this, what became a major personal challenge was data selection, in respect to those seemingly irrelevant data in particular. How does the case researcher know what they have missed? The worry behind this is the thinking that I would be ignorant of data that might be important if seen through the reader’s eyes.

Apart from research experience, composing a thesis in a foreign language makes language a hindrance. Behind the language of English and Chinese are rich but distinct cultures; the hindrance lies, however, not just in the translating, but also the connotative meaning of Chinese conversation. “吃饭 / Chifan (dine together) or 喝茶 / hecha (drinking tea)” for example, means richer than dine or drinking tea together: it can be a gathering together for friendship, or a good time for serious business trading. But it is the change of the meaning, hidden behind in correspondence to the Chinese conversational scene, which causes the most difficulty. I was told by one participant that, in Chinese officialdom, if the subordinate is invited for a tea drinking by his superior, it might be an invitation for gift-giving. The loss of subtle but substantial cultural meaning carried in language in translation harms the quality of this study, for literal translation no doubt lessens the empathy demanded by thick description. Language failures dilute the ‘thickness’.

In addition to the limitations already mentioned, several problems, which motivated me towards this study, are left unexplored, and I believe they deserve some priority in future research. These include family planning policies in schooling enrolment policy: the way in which Chinese mothers take on this extra burden and stress in order to get their children into school. How will this move change the social function of schools? How are these policies completed? Schooling bullies and young students’ suicide cases are other problems left untouched. There have been no signs of any amelioration in the two problems since I started my PhD programme, and they still remain taboo topics in educational and sociological studies.
An additional thought

Divergent from MacDonald who brought in the perspective of politics in categorising the knowledge production ways, Gibbons et al had provided another panel for perceiving how knowledge can be generated: Modes 1 and 2 (Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1994; Nowotny, Scott, & Gibbons, 2003; Groundwater-Smith, & Dadds, 2004; Groundwater-Smith, 2016). Mode 1 tends to be more like the old paradigm of scientific discovery characterised by the hegemony of disciplinary science, with its strong sense of an internal hierarchy between the disciplines and driven by the autonomy of scientists and their host institutions, the universities. Mode 2, being a new paradigm of knowledge production, seems more socially distributed, application-oriented, trans-disciplinary and subject to multiple accountabilities.

To be more specific, Mode 2 tends to display the following features: First, it is in the context of application that Mode 2 knowledge is generated. Second, Mode 2 knowledge requires transdisciplinary knowledge that demands the mobilisation of a range of theoretical perspectives and practical methodologies to solve problems. Third, there is a much greater diversity of the sites at which knowledge is produced, such as the naturalistic observation, the conversational interview, the documentation interpretation. Fourth, Mode 2 knowledge is highly reflexive. Fifth, forms of quality control may emerge as the limits of the traditional, i.e. discipline based peer review systems have become more pronounced.

While I believe my study demonstrates the above mentioned features of Mode 2 knowledge production, I think another feature out of this study deserves extra thinking. The methodology of case-based evaluative inquiry has enabled the inquirer to evaluate her/his own research methods on the way through the whole process. Is this a new feature of Mode 2 or could this possibly be a Mode 3 (Groundwater-Smith, & Mockler, 2009; Mockler, & Groundwater-Smith, 2017)?

To conclude, this experimentation on case study evaluative inquiry is not perfect, but it has given me insight and it has been personally rewarding. If asked now what the case is, I can finally say with confidence that it is the system of getting to know school as a window on contemporary Chinese society.

1. Ban Gan Bu/班干部: It may be loosely translated into “classroom cardres”, a part of the class room management system in today’s China. This system indicates a stratification among the students in classroom life: the class cadre is the top leader with most power, the group leaders under the class cadre are the second layer of power holders, and the rest take the position as the dominated. Usually the student cadres appear powerful to their peers, but the power claimed here is at the cost of being unconditionally submissive to the teachers. This practice faces charges of incitement to power seeking of Chinese children from an age too early in a man-made hierarchical classroom life that is bureaucratic.

2. Bianzhi/编制: (loosely like the concept of “tenure”) Bianzhi usually refers to the authorised number of personnel in a unit, office or organisation and is normally translated as “establishment” (Brødsgaard, K. E., 2012). It is a way to understand how the mechanism of personnel management works under the Organization Department of the Chinese Communist Party—a department of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China that controls staffing positions within the CCP. Because the People’s Republic of China is a one-party state, the Organization Department has an enormous amount of control over personnel within the People’s Republic of China and is, therefore, one of the most important organs of the CCP; it is one of the key agencies of the Central Committee, along with the Central Propaganda Department and International Liaison Department.

3. Bucha tiyou/补差提优: Bucha means to help the slow learners to improve; tiyou means to help the fast learners to perform better.

4. Chifan and Hecha/吃饭喝茶: Chifan (dine together) or Hecha (drinking tea) in Chinese context means richer than dining or drinking tea together: it can be a gathering together for friendship, or a good time for serious business trading. But it is the change of the meaning, hidden behind in correspondence to the Chinese conversational scene, which causes the most difficulty. I was told by one participant that, in Chinese officialdom, if the subordinate is invited for a tea drinking by his superior, it might be an invitation for gift-giving.
5. **Chuan Xiao Xie/穿小鞋:** This can be literally translated as ‘being given tight shoes to wear’ and is often taken as the worst situation an employee can experience as a result of ‘causing trouble’ for their employer.

6. **Da Ge and Xiao Di/大哥和小弟:** Da Ge and Xiao Di are literally translated as Big Brother and Little Brother, terms commonly used in the world of pugilism or in mafia society; Da Ge is usually conferred on the one who leads the team/organisation, and Xiao Di on the low-level people in the organisation.

7. **Daguofan/大锅饭:** By literal sense, it means “a big-pot distribution system”, which for a certain period in modern China indicates egalitarianism (equal treatment for everyone in same institution regardless of the different position and workload).

8. **Gaokao/高考:** It has different English translations: The National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or National Matriculation Examination, National College Entrance Examination (NCEE), or Higher Education Exam.

9. **Guanxi/关系:** Guanxi, a cultural concept in China with its roots in rural society, describes the rudimentary dynamic in personalized social networks of influence (which can be best described as the relationships individuals cultivate with other individuals) and is a central idea in Chinese society. Guanxi largely originates from the Chinese social philosophy of Confucianism, which stresses the importance of associating oneself with others in a hierarchical manner, in order to maintain social and economic order. Particularly, there is an emphasis on implicit mutual obligations, reciprocity, and trust, which are the foundations of guanxi and guanxi networks. Guanxi is about looking after each other. It’s quite strong in-group thinking.

10. **Hukou/户口:** Hukou is a record in the Chinese government system of household registration required by law in mainland China. It determines where citizens are allowed to live. Because of its entrenchment of social strata, especially as between rural and urban residency status, the hukou system is often regarded as a form of caste system (Bell, 2010, p. 86; Marková & Gillespie 2008, p. 63; Perry & Selden, 2003, p. 90). Having one’s household registration coincide with one’s place of residency is very important as it determines one’s access to economic, social and political opportunities and rights.

11. **Ke Cheng/课程:** Ke Cheng is the Chinese term for curriculum (Zhang, 2008, p. 338) and it first appeared in the text of Confucianism. Chinese Ke Cheng is directly related to the great way of 礼/Li (rites) and 乐/Yue (music), with 仁/Ren (benevolence) as its...
core. In Confucian culture, temple and rites and music are all interrelated. Temple
stands for the physical culture; rites and music describe the spiritual culture. Rites and
music are the content of the temple; the temple is the embodiment and symbol of rites
and music. Both have their own intrinsic laws or working “way”. Ke Cheng, therefore,
means the working way of the temple or rites and music, and their construction or
process of creation.
12. Kejiao xingguo/科教兴国: It is a slogan promoted by the Chinese government for
educational reform; it means to revitalize China through developing science and
education.
13. Mianzi/面子: This is what gives rise to the English expression “to save face”, which
describes one’s reputation or dignity in social contexts. Concepts of honor, prestige,
and respect exist in every culture, but in China, they play an instrumental part of most
social interactions. Mianzi promotes trust and respect, which are crucial to gradually
building guanxi (关系 guānxì), or connections, the engine oil of the Chinese
economy. Mianzi is often misunderstood as narcissism possibly because of the
popularity of fancy cars, designer clothing, and all the other trappings of status-
obSESSION seen in major Chinese cities. However, the Chinese concept of mianzi
actually has much less to do with individual perspectives than with collective interests
and opinion. Mianzi is, in fact, something that is given or lent to someone rather than
self-presumptive.
14. Ming/命: When Chinese people say “this is my Ming.” they mean to show their
resignation towards some unfair treatment or tragedy they suffer in life, believing
everything in life is predetermined. Ming may be translated into “fate”.
15. Pinggu/评估: This is the Chinese word for evaluation or assessment. As can be seen
from Chapter Ten in this thesis, Chinese “evaluation” is not what evaluation means in
the West, so I use Pinggu to differentiate between them.
16. Renqing/人情: The closest translation of “Renqing” in English may be Human
Sentiment. Renqing is closely related to Guanxi and Mianzi. The other word for
Renqing could be “favour” which is an important element in maintaining Guanxi in
society.
17. Tu ji hua qian/突击花钱: This is a recent Chinese social phenomenon. This is a vivid
description of the strategy taken by the Chinese government at different levels to
attempt to spend the allocated yearly budget in a very short time span before the end of the year.

18. Yumcha/喝早茶: This is the Cantonese tradition of brunch involving Chinese tea and dim sum. The practice is popular in Cantonese-speaking regions in China, including the southern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi, and the special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau. It is also carried out in other regions worldwide where there are overseas Chinese communities.
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