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Configuration of the Teacher–State Relationship: The Shanghai Experience

Abstract As one of the most prominent cases of high performing education systems in Asia, Shanghai has received widespread attention in recent years. The existing literature has shown that the formation of a high performing education system in Shanghai is closely associated with the high-quality teaching force. The purpose of this paper is to explore the experience of Shanghai in configuring the teacher–state relationship and building the teaching profession against China’s background of centralized education. Our analysis was framed around three key actors that have reshaped the relationship between teachers and State in the post-Mao era, including the establishment of teaching as a profession, schools, and the labor market. Based on policy analysis and empirical evidence from Shanghai, the research findings indicate Shanghai’s own experience in building the teaching profession, teachers’ professional well-being, and other subjective perceptions related to school management and the labor market.

Keywords professional development, professional well-being, teachers, Shanghai, State

Introduction

There is growing attention on Shanghai’s schooling, one of the most prominent cases of high performing education systems in Asia (Deng & Zhao, 2014; Tan, 2013; Tucker, 2011). The researchers seek to understand the reasons for its success and features unique to Shanghai’s education system, for instance, the marriage of Chinese traditional values with modern mechanisms in educational

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governance (Zhang & Kong, 2012); the active roles played by the authorities and the deeply rooted performative culture among educational stakeholders (Tan, 2013); and a delicate balance of three aspects of education, namely selection, justice and independence (Deng & Zhao, 2014). The existing research suggests that a high-quality teaching force and comprehensive teacher training system play an essential role in Shanghai's educational achievement (Li, 2013; Zhang, Xu, & Sun, 2014). This raises a question about whether and how Shanghai, as one of the four metropolitan cities administrated directly by the central government and also among the wealthiest regions in China, has any distinct experience in building a teaching force relevant to reforming the teaching profession in China.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the experience of Shanghai in configuring the teacher–state relationship and building the teaching profession against China's background of centralized education. The teacher group discussed in this paper refers mainly to those working in the public, nine-year compulsory education field. Our analysis is mostly based on data from two sources. The first source is major educational policies relevant to teacher reforms issued by the central government and the Shanghai municipal government. The second source is empirical studies based on the investigations in Shanghai. We shall briefly review the changes concerning the teacher–state relationship in the Mao and post-Mao eras in the research background section. Then the paper will move on to discuss Shanghai's experience, centering on the establishment of teaching as a profession, schools, and the labor market, which play key roles in reshaping the relationship between teachers and state in post-Mao times.

Research Background

The state has played an active role in wielding control over teachers through multiple means including political, ideological, cultural and economic approaches in the history of China's education (Zhao, 2014; Zheng, 2005). The relationship between teachers and the state is a widely debated topic in the Western context as teaching split from being an official government system to being a struggle for professionalism (e.g., Bottery & Wright, 2000; Grace, 2012; Ingersoll, 2003). Carter and Stevenson (2012) argued that the neoliberal, market-oriented policies embraced by many governments make the state's

control increasingly indirect and remote in England. This makes a contrast with many European countries and other places where the state tightly controls the teaching force through standardized testing, national curriculum, and other monitoring mechanisms (Akiba, 2013; Day, 2012).

The social reforms in China over the past decades witnessed a similar trend in the teacher–state relationship. Given that the communist regime made all schools public in Mao Zedong’s time (from 1949 until around 1976), the teachers were generally regarded as “government cadres” (*guojia ganbu*) at that time. That title was, however, only applied to the teachers who enjoyed a place in the government personnel system, while those who did not hold such a place were usually called “non-government teachers” (*minban jiaoshi*; Wang, 2004). The hiring of schools teachers was decided by the local educational authorities, and neither teachers nor schools enjoyed the right to choose each other (Tian & Li, 2002).

Soon after China has launched major economic reforms in the late 1980s, the state started to reform the education sector in order to enhance teachers’ qualification requirements and work motivation. In the early 1980s, the State Education Commission (1983) issued a directive on regulating the teaching force, in which the state set out five specific criteria for qualified teachers including: political-ideological requirements and ethical and moral rules, minimum diploma requirements for teachers at different educational levels, an understanding of pedagogy, ability to speak standard *putonghua*, and good physical health (Art. 1.2.2). It can be seen from the five criteria above that the state’s reform focus was “qualified” teachers rather than “professional” teachers.

The direct relationship between teachers and the state started to be dissolved in the mid-1980s, and by 1986, teachers were no longer considered government officials (Chen & Xiao, 2009). Implemented in the 1990s, *The Teachers Law of the People’s Republic of China* (Standing Committee, 1993) further intended to define the role of teachers in Chinese society. Art. 3 of the *Teachers Law* defines teachers as “professional personnel who fulfill teaching duties” and their work aims to “undertake teaching and nurture people, cultivate socialist builders and successors, and realize the mission of improving quality of the nationals.” The *Teachers Law* clarified three relationships between teachers and the state. First, teaching is a profession, and only those with qualifications would be entitled to membership of this profession. Second, teachers were no longer considered

government officials. The *Teachers Law* stipulated the employment relationship between teachers and schools and that their contract should indicate clearly the rights, duties, and responsibilities of the two sides. The functions of teachers still related closely to serving the nation and building ideology, and thus teachers would continue to have an intimate relationship with the state. Third, with the dissolution of the direct relationship between teachers and the state, the legal identity of teachers became ambiguous. This is particularly true for those working in the compulsory education sector. Falling between the brackets of government officials and ordinary employees, teachers' unclear identity is a source of tension when solving pressing problems for teachers in contemporary China, such as teacher welfare, teachers' rights, and the legal disputes between schools, teachers or students (Chen & Xiao, 2009).

The trend of using “professional standards” instead of the state wielding direct control appears more obvious in the two recent directives by the Ministry of Education (2013) on primary and secondary school teacher certification. In terms of the basic requirements and criteria for becoming a teacher, the two state directives emphasized professional knowledge and skills (e.g., pedagogy, subject knowledge, classroom management), ethics and capacities (e.g., scientific literacy, reading, communications, logic, and information-management). Meanwhile the state's administrative control over teachers has also become decentralized. The state has set the basic criteria for teacher qualifications, but the qualification examinations are developed and administrated at the provincial level. Counties and schools are responsible for hiring and managing teachers.

Shanghai has made significant innovative efforts in reforming its educational systems compared with other regions in China. Examples include curriculum reforms, changes in college admission systems and the popularity of the 5 + 4 + 3 educational structure (five years of primary education, four years of junior secondary education, and three years of senior secondary education) instead of the regular 6 + 3 + 3 scheme prevalent around the nation (Li, 2013; Tan, 2013; Zhang et al., 2014; Zhao, 2007). The focus of this paper is to explore Shanghai's experience of building its teaching profession while China has undergone a reconfiguration of the teacher–state relationship over decades-long educational reforms. In this paper, we will adopt Zhao's (2014) framework of Chinese teacher–state relationships to frame our discussions. Based on the narratives of a group of teachers in China, Zhao (2014) developed a three-dimensional

framework to understand the dynamic relationship between teachers and the state, including teacher–profession–state, teacher–school–state, and teacher–market–state. In the following sections, we shall first give an overview of national changes to education and then focus particularly on the experience in Shanghai.

Teacher–Profession–State

Educational reforms in the post-Mao era have been moving toward establishing a professional status for teachers in China. Wang and Lo (2009) analyzed five major laws and directives issued by the central government in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, and found that the state played a dominant role in the emergence of teacher professionalism in China. The state’s dominance was manifested in the issue of certification, teacher training, ranking and promotion. The teaching profession constructed in the national policy discourse covers four dimensions: political-ideological soundness (loyalty to socialism), teacher ethics (caring for students and acting as moral exemplars), subject knowledge, and teaching skills (Wang & Lo, 2009).

While implementing the policy actions required by the central government, Shanghai showed distinctiveness in reshaping teachers’ relationship with the profession, the local government and the central government. Liu and Wei (2011) analyzed discourse on building the teaching force in three local versions of the *National Medium and Long-Term Outline on Educational Reform and Development (2010–2020)* initiated by the Central Government in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangdong province, all of them among the most economically advanced regions in China. The authors found that the Shanghai version highlighted innovative reforms in enhancing teacher development, and Shanghai also aspired to establish her own teacher certification system. In 2012, the Shanghai Education Committee issued the *Shanghai Primary and Secondary School (including Kindergarten) Teacher Standardized Training Guidance (Trial)*, which required teachers to complete a one-year standardized induction programme run by Shanghai’s local educational institutions (Zhang et al., 2014). Under this requirement, apart from obtaining the national teacher qualification certification, the teachers in Shanghai also need this local “certification.” As explained by the local educational authorities, the purpose of this mechanism is to facilitate new teachers to make the transition from “being ‘qualified’ to

becoming ‘competent’ professionals” (Zhang et al., 2014, p. 153). Compared with the national guidelines by the central government, the contents in Shanghai’s training induction programme put more emphasis on the development of professional competence and practical experience, including professional ethics; classroom management and teaching practice; modeling moral education in the class and developing research abilities for teaching and professional development.

The research on the state’s regulations on teachers over recent decades clearly indicates that teachers’ professional standards have become more complex and demanding. A comparison of the directives issued by the State Education Commission (1983) and the ones by the Ministry of Education (2013) denotes that teachers are required to meet more conditions and also go through a more rigorous assessment process in order to obtain a certificate. Under the recent reform, teachers’ “permanent” certification was abolished, and teachers now have to apply for interim registration every five years. The higher requirement is clearly manifested in the case of Shanghai. Art. 30 of *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China*¹ (National People’s Congress, 2006) states: “A teacher shall obtain the qualifications as prescribed by the state for teachers. The state shall establish a uniform system for the professional titles of teachers engaging in compulsory education.” According to Zhang et al.’s (2014) statistics on Shanghai teachers’ qualifications, “possessing a bachelor’s degree with some kind of teacher professional training has become the new threshold for all the new entrants into the teaching profession in Shanghai” (p. 146). These expectations for new teachers in Shanghai look much higher than the requirement of teachers regulated by the central government in the *Teacher’s Law*. The reasons why Shanghai is able to increase the requirements on teacher qualifications are mainly because there are a large number of universities and colleges located within the jurisdiction, and the Shanghai municipal government also took initiatives in recruiting teachers from other regions in China.

Despite Shanghai’s additional effort in strengthening teachers’ professional development, the teachers’ professional bodies were not seemingly much empowered in the reform process. Teachers have not been empowered to manage themselves on the way of becoming professionals. In a comparison of the

¹ The *Law* was enacted in 1986 and amended in 2006.

development of the teaching profession in Hong Kong and Shanghai, Lai and Lo (2005) argued that the Chinese state employs the delivery of educational policies/directives and the monitoring role of local government organs to seek control over teachers. They found that compared with Hong Kong teachers, Shanghai teachers tend to be more compliant to the government's commands and have less autonomy and independence in exercising their professional judgment. One of the reasons lies in the state's role in the education arena, in which reforms were largely initiated by the state in a top-down manner. Despite the state's attempt to decentralize its administrative power in managing teachers, those actually in the teaching profession have not been empowered.

Therefore, it is not surprising to see that even in Shanghai, teachers do not have self-perceived high job satisfaction levels. For example, The Investigation Team of Shanghai Teachers' Professional Perceptions in Universal Education System (2008) published a report based on their survey with more than 6,000 teachers at pre-education, primary and secondary schools and multiple methods of interviews administrated in 19 districts in Shanghai. In that report, only 11 % of the teachers reported that they feel joy and happiness in this profession. By comparison, 49 % of the sampled teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their profession, and 42 % of them wished to change professions. Unfortunately, due to the lack of comparative studies between Shanghai and other regions in China, little is known about whether Shanghai teachers' levels of professional well-being were higher or lower than their counterparts in other regions of China. In the following two dimensions, we shall focus on the schools and the market, two other important actors that play a mediating role between the state and teachers. The research findings will give more insight into Shanghai teachers' professional well-being.

Teacher-School-State

When the state reformed direct ways of controlling teachers, such as hiring and managing them as government officials, schools became a powerful actor between teachers and the state. One reason is that teachers have to sign employment contracts with schools directly. The establishment of the employment contract system seems to grant teachers and schools equality in the labor market. According to Tian and Li's (2002) investigation with secondary

school teachers in Shanghai, however, schools were more powerful than teachers in the hiring process. The employment contracts were made by the educational authorities or schools, and teachers had limited rights in making and revising the contracts. The reason accounting for the increasing importance in the schools' roles is that schools act as the primary agent in teacher appraisal. The outcome of the appraisal functions as a foundation for teachers' performance-based pay. Apart from salary, it will also influence teachers' ability to obtain the Teacher Qualification Certification, renew employment contracts, and get promotions and the chance of taking part in training, as well as receiving honors and awards.

According to a directive issued by the Ministry of Education (2008) on teacher appraisal, the appraisal contents include: (a) fulfilling the legal duties in the *Compulsory Education Law*, *Teachers Laws*, *Education Law* and other laws and regulations; (b) completing the duties assigned by schools; and (c) work performance, including observing the national ethical codes for teachers, undertaking teaching, and acting as homeroom teachers. In Shanghai's local version (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2009), the municipal educational authorities gave the administrative districts within the jurisdiction autonomy in developing detailed appraisal procedures, but some principles about teacher appraisal were outlined at the municipal level. Schools only play a preliminary role in the appraisal process. The teacher appraisal team formed within a school decides teachers' overall evaluation outcome based on teachers' self-evaluation, peer evaluation and the school administrator's evaluation. The Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (2009) regulation specifies that the overall evaluation has four ratings (excellent, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory), with the rating of "excellent" not exceeding 10 %–15 % of total appraises.

Comparing with counterpart directives issued by the Beijing Municipal Education Commission (2009), we find that the two local versions differ greatly, although both of the local directives were developed based on the same policy from central government. Beijing authorities did not give the administrative districts and schools much autonomy in implementing teacher appraisal; instead, the detailed procedures, evaluation forms, and criteria for the four categories (excellent, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory) were developed by the Beijing Municipal Education Commission. Moreover, the Beijing version did not set a fixed rating for those at the "excellent" rate. The comparison between Beijing

and Shanghai suggests different approaches in the local educational authorities' governing of teachers between the two regions, and probably other regions in China. Based on Tan's (2013) research in Shanghai, "the Shanghai authorities combine decentralization with centralization to encourage school autonomy while maintaining central control" (p. 97). Tan's argument helps to explain the observed differences between Beijing and Shanghai and how Shanghai makes use of the decentralized strategy to monitor and motivate teachers at school.

Some effort has been devoted to reveal the experiences of teachers in Shanghai's educational governance. According to a survey investigation by Zhi, Ma, Lei, and Cheng (2014) with 745 teachers at primary and junior secondary school across eight districts in Shanghai, a vast majority of teachers reported huge perceived pressure at work, experiencing fatigue, worries, depression and other physical and emotional challenges. When teachers were asked to indicate their normal working hours each day, only 8.2 % of the teachers completed their working hours within eight hours. Some 76 % completed their work in between eight to 12 hours and 15.8 % spent even more than 12 hours working. As for the teachers' opinions on school management, 43.1 % reported that as ordinary teachers, they were unable to take part in the school's management and decision-making processes. Meanwhile 52.9 % stated that many assigned tasks by the school management teams were not actually meaningful and teachers had difficulty in dealing with these tasks. Research by the Investigation Team of Shanghai Teachers' Professional Perceptions in Universal Education System (2008) revealed similar findings. The Investigation Team found that only 8 % of the teachers who took part in this study reported that they perceived themselves to have relatively high social status, while 51 % believed they were simply "servants" of schools. Moreover, teachers' perceptions varied across types of schools (public school teachers appeared to be unhappier and perceived more pressure than those in private schools) and schools in different locations (teachers in urban schools developed more positive attitudes toward their profession than their counterparts in rural schools).

Teacher–Market–State

The last actor discussed in this paper is the market. After World War II, the teaching profession, the state and the market became three main forces in

educational reforms in the West, and China also witnessed a changing relationship between these actors (Ye, 2014). In this study, the market refers mainly to the labor market, which involves various factors influencing the supply of and demand for teachers, such as earnings, the security of employment, and working conditions (Webster, Wooden, & Marks, 2006). The labor market imposes a profound impact upon teachers' lives when teachers shift their professional identity from government officials to school employees in China.

Since the economic reforms in the late 1970s, the central government issued several directives to enhance teachers' incomes. According to Du, Liu, and Du's (2013) study on the changes of teacher salaries nationwide between 1978 and 2010, nevertheless, teachers' real salaries, namely the adjusted nominal salaries based on the Consumer Price Index, were essentially not improved. Yang, Wang, Yan, and Shan (2013) developed a system to calculate the teacher development index in China. The system is based on five dimensions, including (a) numbers of teachers, including specific criteria (numbers of teachers per 1,000 laborers; numbers of teachers per 10,000 persons in population, ratios of certified teachers in the total school personnel and proportions of non-government (supply) teachers); (b) structure of teaching force (gender ratio of teachers); (c) teaching arrangement (student–teacher ratio and means of teachers per class); (d) teacher quality (proportion of teachers meeting the government's requirement of academic degree and proportion of teachers ranked medium in the rank levels); and (e) teacher welfare (average yearly salary of teachers). The results revealed that the teacher development indexes were related closely to the economic development levels in different provinces and regions, and Shanghai's teacher development index was ranked highest in China (Yang et al., 2013). Furthermore, Shanghai teachers' incomes were ranked highest throughout pre-schooling, primary and secondary educational levels. Similarly, Du's (2014) recent research on teacher incomes across China's different provinces and regions also shows that the teachers in Shanghai have the highest earnings. Based on data collected in 2011, Du (2014) found that Shanghai teachers' income was 2.6 times that of their counterparts in Gansu province, where teachers received the lowest incomes in China.

The primary reason why Shanghai teachers received relatively high incomes lies deeply in the present approach of financing compulsory education set out by the central government. The *Compulsory Education Law* regulated that the duties

of financing teacher salaries and other welfare benefits are undertaken by the local governments at different administrative levels (National People's Congress, 2006). The state's requirement is that the average salaries of teachers shall not be lower than the average salaries of the local civil servants. Unsurprisingly, as revealed in the existing studies (Du et al., 2013; Du, 2014), the teachers' economic incomes are closely relevant to the levels of economic development in a region.

Compared with other occupational incomes within China, the economic returns of the teaching professionals are not attractive in society. Du et al. (2013) performed a longitudinal analysis on teacher incomes around the nation between 1978 and 2010. They found that before 1998, teachers earned less than average salaries most years, and more recently, teachers' income were slightly higher than the average. Comparing teacher incomes with incomes in other categories of occupations in the nation, Du et al. (2013) found that teachers' earnings were usually ranked in the lowest 20 %–30 %. Despite a big increase in teachers' income in recent years, the teacher group still falls into the bottom 50 %. In another study by Du (2014), a similar conclusion was made.

In Shanghai, a place regarded as the best-paid place for teachers to work in China, the results of empirical research are mixed. Zhang et al. (2014) used the criteria of the ratio of teachers' salaries in Shanghai after 15 years of experience (minimum training) to GDP per capita and claimed that teachers are "relatively well-paid" (p. 145). Other empirical studies, however, have indicated that the teacher group does not seem very satisfied with its economic compensation. For example, Zhi and his colleagues' (2014) survey results indicate that most teachers are not satisfied with their incomes. More specifically, only 7.8 % of teachers who participated in the survey thought their incomes matched their competence, while 70.9 % stated that their gains could not efficiently compensate for what they had contributed. Some 38.7 % reported that they were unable to cover daily expenses and were not well-off in daily life. In another study conducted by the Investigation Team of Shanghai Teachers' Professional Perceptions in Universal Education System (2008), the findings were similar to those from Zhi et al. (2014): Only 1 % of the sampled teachers felt their income was relatively high, and 8 % believed the economic returns were simply average.

Conclusion

The continuing educational reforms in the Post-Mao era move toward strengthening the teaching profession. This study adopts the framework of the teacher–state relationship to conceive how the emerging teaching profession relates to teachers’ participation in the changing power dynamics of China’s educational reforms. We go beyond the teachers’ academic or instructional activities and explore their interactions with other social actors (Zhao, 2014). As noted by Zheng (2005), the professionalization of teachers is intertwined with their political, social, and economic power.

Our analysis of the three dimensions reveals two main findings. First, against China’s background of centralized education, Shanghai tactically built her system to promote teacher development by strengthening teachers’ professional competence, using strategies of decentralization in governance and enhancing teachers’ income (compared with teachers in China’s other regions). A comparison of two major directives on teacher training delivered by the central government in 1986 and 2011 revealed that there were two significant changes in addressing the purposes of teacher training activities (Shan, 2013). First, training requirements move from an emphasis on societal needs to catering to teachers’ diverse needs. Second, the content of the training activities shifted from transmission of textbook information to building teachers’ individual capabilities and teaching competence. These two trends are also explicit in the case of Shanghai. As argued by Ho (2014) in the analysis of the success of Hong Kong’s education system, “evidence from PISA studies indicated that the decentralized model of school governance appears to be most efficient in mobilizing different actors and resources for students’ learning” (p. 179). When the Chinese State adopts more decentralized strategies in educational governance, Shanghai seems to make extra efforts to decentralize its own education system to pursue quality and efficiency.

Second, some empirical findings included in this study show teachers’ responses to and perceptions toward policy changes in Shanghai. The empirical evidence reveals ordinary teachers’ subjective perceptions about their professional identity and well-being in reality while engaging with the government, schools and the market. This paper argues that the emerging teaching profession is embedded in a new mode of teacher–state relationship. In

other words, the State changed the means of controlling teachers, but teachers are not yet empowered as real professionals in the reform process. Shanghai has had great achievements in enhancing teachers' professional development, but a more challenging task is to improve the professional status of the entire teaching group. An important question for future research will be to investigate how factors such as the exercise of professional competence and job satisfaction influence teachers' instructional activities, their attitudes towards students, and student performance. Finally, it is worth mentioning that the discussions in this study are largely confined to teachers in the public sector. Given the rise of private schools in China, future research is needed to examine differences between public and private school teachers in terms of professional development and teacher identity.

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