

# Shadow education with Chinese characteristics

Thirty years ago, under a strict socialist regime which prohibited private-sector activities in education and other sectors, China was very different from its capitalist neighbours in East Asia. Now it increasingly resembles them. The scale of shadow education is among the similarities. But China still has some distinctive characteristics.

Wei Zhang

WITH 208 MILLION CHILDREN in primary and secondary schools, China's education system is the largest in the world.<sup>1</sup> Like the country as a whole, the education system has undergone radical shifts in the last three decades. One dimension has been the nationwide emergence of the shadow system of supplementary private tutoring.

In some respects, the shadow education system in China resembles that in its East Asian neighbours. However, China has some distinctive ingredients in the dynamics of change. First is the dramatic economic growth of the last few decades, which has given families disposable incomes beyond their greatest dreams. Second is the one-child-family policy, which means that parents can concentrate their increased incomes on just one child. And third has been the emergence of new avenues for social mobility, which have increased competition between families. Add to that the traditions of a Confucian culture that value learning and diligence, and the stage seems to be set for massive growth of private supplementary tutoring. And that is precisely what is occurring.

## Indicators of scale

Although data on the scale and intensity of private tutoring in China are scarce, a few studies have provided indicative numbers. For example:

- China's 2004 Urban Household Education and Employment Survey indicated that 55 percent of students surveyed were receiving private tutoring.<sup>2</sup>
- A 2008 survey of 827 pupils in Gansu, Hunan and Jiangsu Provinces showed that 74 percent of Grade 9 pupils received tutoring.<sup>3</sup>
- In 2009 the *Beijing Evening News* reported that 56 percent of 9,380 urban households in 18 prefectures including Beijing were investing in private tutoring.<sup>4</sup>

These surveys provide some numerical foundation to a phenomenon which has become clearly evident even to casual observers. The reception areas of tutorial centres are typically filled by long queues of obedient students. Not all of the students in these queues look happy or excited.

## A stratified society

As in the other countries, such as Japan and South Korea, private tutoring in China has been stimulated by the major status differences in school and university rankings and by high-stakes entrance examinations.

As a result of the expansion of higher education, a university degree no longer guarantees a decent job or a high standard of living. Many parents recognize that their child's future is likely to be brighter if it is underpinned by a degree from a prestigious university; and tickets to those universities are mostly offered by elite high schools. Every transition point is a battle for advantageous positions in high-ranking schools or universities. Tutoring is a weapon to help children to win on this battleground.

The expansion of tutoring can also be linked to curriculum reform. Reductions in school hours have allowed more free time for both pupils and teachers to participate in tutoring. The central government has recently launched a new round of curriculum reforms to alleviate the burden of learning on pupils. But so long as the system remains competitive, parents are unlikely to slow their pace.

## The dual role of mainstream teachers

In some countries, the bulk of private tutoring is provided through commercial firms, some of which operate in multiple cities and operate franchises. China does have a few market leaders, and corporate provision is increasingly evident. However, most private tutoring is provided by mainstream teachers. Some of these teachers tutor pupils for whom they are already responsible in mainstream schools. The 2008 survey of Gansu, Hunan and Jiangsu Provinces indicated that 72 percent of surveyed pupils were tutored by mainstream teachers; and 45 percent of the pupils received tutoring from their own teachers in the mainstream classes.<sup>5</sup>

The dual role of teachers has been the focus of some public criticism. However, it can be defended. Teachers' salaries have been modest compared with other professions; and trained teachers may be better at tutoring than untrained university students and others. Many teachers try hard to help their students in both school and tutoring hours. The time available for formal schooling may not be enough to cover the entire curriculum, to meet the needs of every student, and to produce high admission rates to high-status institutions at the next educational level. Parents seem to have confidence in teachers who are qualified and already know the children.

On the other side of the coin, this type of tutoring could reduce the teachers' incentive to teach well during school hours. Some teachers may 'save' parts of the curriculum during the school day in order to keep it for the private lessons and thereby gain extra earnings. Some teachers may even coerce students to take their extra classes.

English and mathematics teachers are major players in the secret market, since these subjects weigh heavily in entrance examinations. Teachers who make a name in the mainstream system have many clients. Their tutees include students from the schools where they are teaching, students from neighbouring schools, and even students from other cities who are attracted by their reputations.

The nature of tutoring by mainstream teachers varies according to the demand. One-to-one tutoring usually takes place at the teacher's or the tutee's home. Tutoring may also be in small groups at the teacher's house or in the home of one of the tutees. Parents sometimes arrange venues to accommodate larger numbers of students. Some teachers provide tutoring on school premises, but this is increasingly frowned upon by the school authorities. In some extreme cases, the students live in the teachers' houses so that they can be tutored whenever there is a need.

## The nature of corporate provision

Despite the competition, different providers of tutoring in China seem to 'feed' each other very well. Private companies could hardly survive at their early stage of development without the support from mainstream teachers and university students. Recruitment of mainstream teachers and university students seems more economic and effective than investment in training of full-time tutors. Most leading companies in the market started with this type of cooperation, later expanding by recruiting and training their own tutors.

Many tutoring centres advertise by highlighting the number of in-service teachers, and particularly the prestigious ones. One large company in Beijing is called Giant, and has 10 branches in other cities. Its website declares that:



"Supplementing tutoring or supplementing income to his pocket?"

— We have a strong team of elite tutors comprising prestigious teachers, professors, researchers and experts of overseas education. Approximately 500 education experts and 6,000 part- and full-time teachers work in our Centre.<sup>6</sup>

The prestigious teachers are called *ming shi*. They usually have rich experience in formal education, detailed knowledge of the entrance examinations, and long lists of former students who have entered elite universities. Eminent university professors are also hired as tutors or consultants. These names are well recognised, and the professors are among the most strongly sought-after tutors.

## Government responses

Most local governments have chosen to ignore the existence of tutoring. The central government has also avoided the issue, though has recently recognised the pressures on pupils and has taken steps to raise teachers' salaries and thus to remove the economic pressures on teachers.

However, now that the culture of tutoring has arrived, it will be very difficult to reverse. Teachers who have found that they have the time and ability to earn extra incomes are likely to hold onto these new possibilities; and parents of single-child families will not risk the futures of their offspring. The local and central governments do have some levers to steer the tutoring industry; but they must recognise that it is a vibrant force which is increasingly entrenched.

When devising government policies, a starting point must lie in better inventories of the scale, nature and impact of tutoring. The corollary of the fact that China has the world's largest education system is that the country is diverse. Much better data are needed to map the geographic and other variations in tutoring. Securing the data is a role for university-based researchers as well as for the various arms of government.

Wei Zhang  
The University of Hong Kong, China  
pkurainy@hku.hk

## References

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- 2 Shen, H. (2008). An investigation on factors influencing private supplementary tutoring at the level of compulsory education. *Economics of Education Research (Beida)*, Vol.6, No.3, pp.1-10. [in Chinese] Note, however, that the survey did not distinguish between tutoring in academic subjects taught in mainstream schools and tutoring in music, sports, art or other supplementary subjects.
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- 4 Li, L. 2009. *Investigation Report: 25% students spent more than 8 hours alone during winter holiday without supervision from parents*. Beijing: Beijing Evening News. [in Chinese] Available from: <http://gaokao.eduu.com/e/20090203/4b8bc9afc6f49.shtml> [Accessed 30 October 2010]
- 5 See Note 3, above.
- 6 *Introduction of the education group*. Juren Education Group. [in Chinese] Available from: <http://www.juren.com/about/#> [Accessed 2 November 2010]

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