

ANÁLISIS

China's Universities and Social Change: Expectations, Aspirations, and Consequences

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Abstract

Studies of higher education often assume that there is a close relationship between economic growth, social change, and political transformation. It is argued that economic growth leads not simply to a demand for the expansion of higher education but also an increase in social equity in admissions to universities. Students become more radicalised through this process; and both through economic growth and the expansion of higher education, academic staff who are the core after all of a society's public intellectuals, also become the voice for political transformation. The evidence from the People's Republic of China is that while there has been massive economic growth during the last thirty years, and an equally dramatic expansion of higher education since 1997, the consequences for higher education in terms of social change have

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been considerably more limited. Moreover, while there have been some voices for limited political transformation from staff and students, the demands for regime change that might have been expected given the experiences of other countries are virtually non-existent.

Keywords: China, higher education, economic growth, social development, political change

UNIVERSIDADES DE CHINA Y CAMBIO SOCIAL: EXPECTATIVAS, ASPIRACIONES Y CONSECUENCIAS

Resumen

Estudios sobre la educación superior a menudo asumen que existe una estrecha relación entre el crecimiento económico, el cambio social, y la transformación política. Se argumenta que el crecimiento económico no conduce simplemente a una demanda de la expansión de la educación superior, sino también a un aumento de la equidad social en las admisiones a las universidades. Los estudiantes se vuelven más radicalizados a través de este proceso, y, tanto a través del crecimiento económico como de la expansión de la educación superior, el personal académico, quien es el núcleo detrás de todos los intelectuales públicos de una sociedad, también se ha convertido en la voz de la transformación política. La evidencia de la República Popular China es que, si bien ha habido un crecimiento económico masivo durante los últimos treinta años, y una expansión igualmente impresionante de la educación superior desde 1997, las consecuencias para la educación superior en términos de cambio social han sido considerablemente más limitadas. Además, si bien ha habido algunas voces para la transformación política limitada por parte del personal y los estudiantes, las demandas de cambio de régimen que pudieron haberse esperado, dadas las experiencias de otros países, son prácticamente inexistentes.

Palabras clave: China, educación superior, crecimiento económico, desarrollo social, cambio político.

Social science generally assumes that as far as higher education is concerned there is a close relationship between economic growth, social change, and political transformation. A simple series of equations are held to be true.

Economic growth leads to a demand for the expansion of higher education as an expanding middle class searches for qualifications for their children. In that process there is also an expectation of an increase in social equity through admissions to universities from previously disadvantaged classes and social categories. The student body becomes more radicalised through both a rising standard of living and the expansion of higher education. The same forces similarly impact academic staff who are after all the core of a society's public intellectuals, and who also become the voice for political transformation and often regime change.

The most recent evidence for such arguments outside the People's Republic of China (PRC) rests most dramatically in the events of 1968 and 1989, especially in Europe. 1968 was the year of student revolutions in the world's developed economies, part and parcel of the processes of post-war change that included the emergence of new youth cultures, female liberation, and the mainstreaming of alternative lifestyles and voices. 1989 was restricted more to the events in Eastern Europe triggered by the collapse of the Soviet Union, leading to a wave of near-universal democratised politics, in which middle class intellectuals appeared to take central stage.

The PRC too had its 1968 (or at least 1966-8) and 1989 but for various reasons these were dramatically different in cause, as well as in outcomes. While the greater social inclusivity of universities in Europe with their expansion starting in the 1960s is certainly exaggerated, there was considerable social change underway; and 1989 was certainly a social movement of change. It is far from clear that the same can be said of the PRC at either time. On both occasions a solid case can and has been made that this was the children of the elite motivated to preserve their own expected privileges.

The Red Guard movement —the PRC's late 1960s apparent student revolt— that played a central role in Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, was much more closely and directly linked to elite politics than anything in the European or North American experience. The children of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) elite had not fared well through the earlier part of the 1960s and there was a distinct element of restorationism about their responses to Mao's call to "Bombard the Headquarters!" (Gordon White, 1976; Anita Chan, 1986) which even extended to arguments about the preservation of "revolutionary bloodlines" (Billeter, 1985: 131). In 1989, the student manifestation in Tiananmen Square was so introspective that its failure to

build a wider coalition is often seen, somewhat unfairly given the power of the state ranged against it, as a major point of failure (Walder and Gong, 1993).

Moreover, the immediate consequences of 1966 and 1989 in China were dramatically different, leading in both cases to greater repression of intellectual freedom, especially among students. Universities were closed for several years

While there has been massive economic growth in China during the last thirty years, and an equally dramatic expansion of higher education since 1998, the results in terms of social change have been limited and in terms of pressures for political transformation virtually non-existent. Despite considerable expectation of increased social equity, the expansion of higher education has not resulted in higher participation rates for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds

during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and political correctness was put ahead of academic merit in student selection — qualification was as a “worker, peasant, soldier” student— when they were re-opened. After 1989 greater political controls were placed on students and they were required to undertake more intense political education and military training as part of the higher education curriculum.

While there has been massive economic growth in China during the last thirty years, and an equally dramatic expansion of higher education since 1998, the results in terms of social change have been limited and in terms of pressures for political transformation virtually non-existent. Despite considerable expectation of increased social equity, the expansion of higher education has not resulted in

higher participation rates for those from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. The dramatic increase in student numbers has also meant a dramatic increase in teaching and administrative staff. This may be one obvious explanation for the relative lack of political resistance to the state, but it is far from the whole story. In addition, especially since 1990 the CCP has moved to ensure a degree of regime compliance from both students and staff in measured and planned ways.

Social inclusivity and the expansion of higher education

Although the PRC's reform era most usually dates from late 1978, there is a significant dividing line within reform in 1992. Before 1992 reform was often hesitant, and despite structural changes in government's operations also often small-scale. After 1992 reform was not only embraced more fully by the Party-state but also on a far grander scale. One of the defining features of the post 1992 reform era has been the dramatic expansion of higher education.

Before the Cultural Revolution, universities had been elite institutions, including comprehensive universities and teacher training ("normal") colleges under the Ministry of Education, and other more specialist higher education institutions under other ministries. Universities and colleges were effectively closed during the Cultural Revolution and only re-opened in the mid-1970s with entry restricted to "worker, peasant, soldier" students under the policy of "Politics in Command". By 1978, there were still only about 856,000 university undergraduates in under 600 institutions, with very few postgraduates, and only 165,000 undergraduates graduating annually. Table 1 charts the expansion of higher education since 1978.

As table 1 indicates, even with the introduction of a national competitive examination system in 1977 while numbers doubled in the 1980s, they remained low. At the end of 1998 and beginning of 1999 the decision was taken to significantly expand higher education and despite the higher education's limited capacity numbers doubled in one year. The sector has subsequently grown dramatically. Part of the strategy for growth was the merger of existing small (and sometimes not-so-small) institutions of higher education to make larger scale universities. About 700 state institutions became about 300 universities. Another part has been the licencing of society-run (*Minban*) and private (*Siying*) institutions of higher education, which now account for about 10 percent of undergraduate enrolments. Within the state sector, 118 universities were singled out (in 1995) for development as key research centres; and between 1999 and 2011, 39 leading universities have been additionally funded to develop as international-standard institutions of higher education.

The expansion has been dramatic, even since 1998, let alone when comparisons are made with 1978. By 2013 there were more than 23 million undergraduates and about 7 million postgraduate students at Chinese universities. Seven million students graduated in 2013 (Xinhua, 25 June 2103), the number of universities and colleges has more than doubled (to at least

2,442 in 2012) and there has been a huge increase in state investment in higher education rising from 33.4 billion *yuan* in 1997 to 290.2 billion *yuan* in 2011 (NBS 2012: 20–40). By 2012 there were 1.44 million university teachers, compared to 463,000 in 2000, and 206,000 in 1978.

Table 1
PRC higher education expansion, 1978–2012

<i>Year</i>	<i>Undergraduate numbers</i>	<i>Total population</i>	<i>Number of colleges</i>	<i>Number of teachers</i>	<i>Graduating undergraduates</i>
1978	856,000	962,590,000	598	206,000	165,000
1990	2,063,000	1,143,330,000	1075	395,000	614,000
2000	5,561,000	1,267,270,000	1041	463,000	950,000
2010	22,318,000	1,340,910,000	2358	1,343,000	5,754,000
2012	23,913,000	1,354,040,000	2442	1,440,000	6,247,000

Source: *China Statistical Yearbook 2013*, 3–1, pp. 20–5; 20–6; 20–8; 20–9.

This increase in higher education has been heralded quite explicitly in terms of improved social mobility, and in particular as providing increasing access to the middle class. To quote researchers at the CASS Institute of Sociology:

the expansion of college enrolment has enabled millions of students to enjoy opportunities for higher education, the opportunities for social mobility has gradually increased and each year the several millions of college graduates directly create a reserve force for the expansion of the middle class characterized by high academic qualifications (Hu, Li and Li, 2012: 419–20).

The expansion of higher education capacity has also been heralded as providing opportunities, especially for women, rural residents, and minority nationalities, all of whom have long been recognised as being under-represented in higher education places. Rural women in particular have been targeted for recruitment on equity grounds. The potential for social engineering in the expansion of higher education is clear, as its role in the state-sponsored discourse of the middle class. The argument is neatly summarised by Jing Lin and Xiaoyuan Sun:

a potentially massive middle class is being created through higher education expansion. The expansion allows the new middle class to come from all sectors of the society, broader in scale than ever before and potentially affecting every family and community in China (Lin and Sun, 2010: 222).

Unfortunately the evidence is that these hopes for greater social inclusion have not been realised. On the contrary: higher education expansion has only benefitted the already privileged. As Teresa Wright has pointed out, higher education provides the main path to good jobs (Wright, 2010). Good jobs are of course not guaranteed, but without higher education, and often a Masters degree as well as a first degree, high status employment is less likely (Bai, 2006). Secondary schools provide the access to higher education and so parents attempt to position themselves through housing and in other ways to ensure their children can attend a school that has a good track record of university entrance. Almost all such schools are located in the neighbourhoods of the already wealthy and educated. Even so, admission often also entails payments to the school by parents to ensure their children can enrol (Lee Ching Kwan, 2009: 220). Wright concludes:

since the early 1990s in China, more university students have come from financially privileged families who have benefitted from economic reform. Fewer qualified students from average and low-income homes have been admitted, and fewer have had the financial capacity to enrol (Wright, 2010: 66).

The paradox is then clear; to have the opportunity to become middle class in the future one must come from at least a middle class background in the first place.

A specific research project looking at four leading universities in Shaanxi, Sichuan and Anhui during 2009 reinforces the view that higher education has become the preserve of the upper and middle classes. The project was designed to see whether recruitment to higher education in these relatively poorer provinces was able to ensure positive outcomes in favour of previously less-privileged groups in society. The conclusion was that it had not. Women and those from rural areas were under-represented in enrolment to university. Rural women were significantly underrepresented, though urban women were not. The children of rich rural individuals were not underrepresented but those from poor areas were. Poor, rural women from minority nationality groups were found to be the most underrepresented of all. According to the

researchers “College is still a rich, Han, urban and male club” (Wang, Liu, Zhang, Shi and Rozelle, 2013: 469).

As if this were not enough, the evidence from other research suggests that the expanded student body is highly segmented. There may now be just under two and a half thousand university institutions with thirty million plus students but no one is under any illusion that the universities, let alone the students, are equal in any sense. The children of the elite go to schools that specialise in ensuring entry to the elite universities. The newer, less prestigious and less well-resourced institutions attract those students pursuing their parents’ middle class dreams, often without the necessary pre-tertiary educational background. Sometimes, these newer universities, and there have been some noticeable success stories, concentrate on professional studies and training for the commercial world. But many are simply commercial activities cynically organized to meet aspirations to social mobility. Many are even colleges organized in the so-called private sector by established elite and provincial universities. There have as yet been no detailed studies of the operations of these kinds of institutions, but Terry Woronov’s study of similarly established “vocational” secondary schools demonstrates quite clearly the ways in which students are being schooled for failure (Woronov, 2012).

Moreover, social class is clearly not the only determinant of educational opportunity, career development and social mobility. Children born in Beijing, Shanghai, and even Jiangsu Province have an inherent advantage by virtue of birth. The national university entrance examination (the *gaokao*) is a national assessment, but it does not result in an equally open competition for university places across the country. Each university negotiates its own quotas, and associated pass rates, with the Ministry of Education. University entrance results from a complex equation of household registration, nationality, the score achieved in the entrance examination, and the population of the applicant’s home provincial-level jurisdiction. It is, for example, generally harder for students from the most populous provinces to access the more elite institutions, both because the most populous provinces (Henan, Shandong, Sichuan) do not have any of the leading elite universities, and because they have more students taking the national entrance examination, thereby ensuring comparatively high university entrance scores. Conversely, students from Beijing and Shanghai have fewer applicants for more places each year, as well as lower scores being required for entrance by native-registered applicants. Faced by the obvious resulting inequalities a recent CCP Politburo discussion

considered providing more reserved places for applicants from China's interior and large provinces, as well as rural students (Politburo, 2014).

The political activism of university teachers

One of the characteristics of protest and expressivism in the latter half of the Twentieth Century elsewhere in the world would appear to have been the leadership role played in such movements by university academics, even if few achieved the global fame of a Noam Chomsky, or even a Daniel Cohn-Bendit. Despite the more closed nature of its politics, China too has had its social critics among the ranks of university academics, including some who have been seen as promoting radical opposition to the regime. On the whole though the weight of evidence would seem to suggest that university academics remain a bulwark of the Party-state.

The most notable of academic dissidents in the PRC has been Liu Xiaobo. Liu Xiaobo was a public intellectual and lecturer at Beijing Normal University who was already politically active before 1989, but who shot to international fame through his role in the events of May and June, including his role in ensuring a lesser bloodbath when the military was eventually brought in to clear Tiananmen Square. He was imprisoned for his role in the demonstrations of 1989, and repeatedly after his release for his opposition to the regime, including his role in the 1998 *Charter 08* organization celebrating sixty years of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. He was imprisoned for eleven years in 2009 and awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2010.

Liu Xiaobo may be the most famous, but he is not the only university academic to have been dismissed for public espousal of democratic values and action, though imprisonment is less usual. In August 2013, for example, Professor Zhang Xuezhong of East China University of Political Science and Law (and another drafter of *Charter 08*) was dismissed reportedly for his promotion of democratic ideas. In October 2013, Xia Yeling, an economist at Peking University was dismissed reportedly for his political views and after a vote of his departmental colleagues (SCMP, 19 October 2013).

On the other hand, as might be expected, there are few academics who write explicitly calling for regime change and the overthrow of the Party-state. This is not to say that there are not those who articulate radical criticisms of current politics or social trends, but rather that such criticisms are expressed in more nuanced ways, including never suggesting the end of the current

regime, but rather its need to change. Two particular channels for those kinds of discussion have been criticism of the rising inequality, and concerns about the abuse of position and power, with which inequality is often associated in the public consciousness (Zang, 2008; Luo Changping, 2013).

Sun Liping, professor of Sociology at Tsinghua University in Beijing is a well-known and high profile example of an academic offering this kind of critique. He has argued that until the corruption of the political ruling class is brought to heel, it will not be possible to go further in dealing with inequality either; and he has called for China to “build a society which is just and fair”, starting with the development of institutions to control corruption (Sun Liping, 2006). Most stridently, he has explicitly linked wealth, government and corruption:

In the 21st century, China's two most obvious characteristics have been the inflation of power and the failure of power, and these two have become intertwined. The process of the strengthening of the government's capacity to extract resources ... concentrated more and more money in the hands of the government. And he who has wealth speaks loudest. ... Vested interests have now become entrenched, the result being tremendous social unfairness. In dealing with this social unfairness, the government has been utterly helpless. It has turned to stability preservation in the hope of ensuring unwelcome things don't happen... Recently I raised the issue of the “license to do evil”. In stability preservation, the overriding concern is that “nothing happens”, and no one pays any attention to how you achieve that goal. Whatever abuse of power you commit can be justified in the name of stability preservation (Sun Liping, 2013).

And in mid-2014, he demonstrated clearly once again that the articulation of an independent voice is possible in an authoritarian state:

In fact, the call for reform is now going down too narrow a path, one that is full of pitfalls, more difficult even than reform itself. We have come to a historic fork in the road. I have previously discussed the problem of the two traps: the left trap of totalitarianism, and the right trap of elitism. In order to neutralize the elite it is easy to walk the path of totalitarianism. But if the elite prevail then what follows is the plunder of social and public wealth. Either way, the results are disastrous (Sun Liping, 2014).

One reason for the lack of articulated outright opposition to the Party-state is clearly the fear of reprisal, but this is not the whole story. It is also clear

that the Party-state has acted where necessary to ensure a closer relationship with social groups that might otherwise present challenges to the regime. The Party-state's accommodation of private entrepreneurs and the latter's increasing embeddedness in the political system is a good example of this process (Dickson, 2010). Something similar has occurred in the development of the Party-state's policy towards university teachers.

At the start of the reform era, university teachers were rapidly becoming dissatisfied. Inflation was a serious problem. Compared to others with similar educational and social backgrounds, their salaries seemed to be going backwards, and many were forced to take second jobs. A small but vocal minority were involved in reform activity during the 1980s that stepped beyond the Party-state's acceptable limits. This became particularly acute within the Tiananmen demonstrations of May 1989, where many university academics were also involved in leadership positions alongside their students (Wright, 2010: 72).

In the wake of the 1989 demonstrations in Beijing, the Party-state moved to improve salaries and conditions for university teachers. Salaries were restored to a position of greater comfort, with mechanisms introduced for regular review so that academic income would at least keep pace with inflation. New schemes were introduced to recognize academic excellence, that both ensured higher incomes for high profile and high performing academics, and that brought individuals into government service and positions of advice.

A fresh relationship between university academics and the Party-state was forged, and this was further developed during the late 1990s when university staff, as members of the state sector, were privileged through the processes of housing reform. More than anything else, it is probably the privatisation of housing for those working within the Party-state that has shaped the emergence of the PRC's middle class, of which university academics are clearly a highly visible component.

University members of staff at the time of the housing reform had the opportunity to buy where they already lived at a subsidised price of between one-third and two thirds of market price. These dwellings are mostly located on campus because of the original work-unit development of educational infrastructure before 1978. On the other hand, most are subsequently in a very pleasant, secure, and convenient location with lots of open spaces, access to schools, clinics and other amenities. The only limitation on the new purchaser of the dwelling is that if they sell the property to another member

of the university it has to be at the institution's subsidised rate (usually fixed annually at a cost per square meter). The purchaser is free to sell the apartment on the open market for a much higher price than was originally paid. While a university academic selling this way would still need to find somewhere to live, the dwelling still represents a substantial addition of capital and asset that can at least be partially realizable.

Often too, university experiments in real estate can and do benefit academics even further. A university may decide as many have done in the last fifteen years with the expansion of higher education, to open a new campus somewhere else. The university will build not only new offices, teaching and administrative areas, but also new housing for its staff. New apartments are offered to all members of staff at the current subsidised rate, even those who already have an originally university-subsidised property: the new campus counting as a different place to the original campus, even though it may be next to or close by. The university member of staff in question can then buy a second apartment on the same terms as the first, realise their assets by selling the first on the open market, and have somewhere to live.

With the restoration of their social status, political position, and economic benefit it is little surprise that the overwhelming majority of university academics have a disproportionately positive attitude towards the Party-state. Moreover, almost a million new university teachers (table 1) have been appointed since 1998. As Tang and Unger conclude from their survey of university teachers during 2007–9:

The Chinese educated middle class has, as a whole, become a bulwark of the current regime. As a consequence, regime change or democratization should not be expected any time soon. The rise of China's educated middle class blocks the way (Tang and Unger, 2013: 109).

Of course, there remains a small group of university academics who advocate regime change in their writings and activities, but the vast majority are clearly regime-supporting. Many if not most are CCP members; others serve in government and state agency positions (Zheng Yongnian, 2006: 250; Wright, 2010: 76).

At the same time, it is equally the case that university academics are disproportionately in favour of political reform within the current system (Li Chunling, 2013: 32). There are a number of issues and areas in which univer-

sity academics have been particularly active in voicing the need for change. One is the question of equality, though more often than not this equality is seen in purely economic or income terms (Lee Ching Kwan, 2009); and another (as already noted) is the concern with official corruption, though clearly university academics have not been alone in this regard. While university academics are more generally favourably disposed towards democratic values of rights and interest articulation, this is more than offset by their concerns to avoid any socio-political change that may jeopardize their high standard of living (Chen Jie, 2013).

The political behavior of university students

The assumption that contemporary university students in the PRC will be radical proponents of political change could not be more profoundly misplaced. Neither the experience of the Cultural Revolution, when Mao called on student Red Guards to “overthrow those in authority taking the capitalist road”, nor of the 1980s when demonstrating students erected the Goddess of Democracy in Tiananmen Square, is an appropriate historical antecedent. As already noted, neither of those student movements can be regarded as unreservedly anti-establishment. In any case, it is also clear that circumstances have changed dramatically since 1989, let alone the 1960s, resulting in what one commentator has described as the “deactivism” of university students (Yan Xiaojun, 2014). Higher education is no longer the preserve of the elite, and the concerns and attitudes of the student body have changed accordingly. Moreover, the Party-state’s awareness of the need to manage the student body has become considerably more sophisticated, moving well beyond an approach based on coercion and ideological education, to one relying more on organization and incentives.

With the assumption of political power in 1949 the CCP moved swiftly to organize and control universities and their students. It developed its own structures within universities, and ensured it controlled appointments. Students were organized through classes and years, separate from their membership of the Communist Youth League. The university curriculum was completely overhauled around ideological education, practical knowledge, and specializations that served the planned long-term economic development priorities (Hsu, 1964; Price, 1970; Andreas, 2009; Walder, 2009). The control system was necessarily seriously disrupted by the Cultural Revolution, resulting in

essentially the attempt to manage students through mass movements and ideological fervor. It was an attempt which proved fundamentally flawed not least because groups of university students rapidly became cynical, and the whole exercise of repeated ideological campaigns proved counter-productive (Kent, 1981; Shirk, 1982).

The university student control mechanisms established in the 1980s essentially recreated the pre-Cultural Revolution system around structures of the university Party branch, the Communist Youth League (CYL), and localized student committees. As in the past, the principal idea was to try to ensure discipline from above with enthusiasm from below. Though these structures remained even after 1989, with the CCP's reaction to the events of that year, a more centralized system was introduced during the 1990s in which local activities were placed under the university Party committee more directly. Universities established Student Work Departments as departments under the Party Committee to directly mobilize and manage students in their class and year groups (Fang Huijian, 2003: 373). They also appointed Student Political Counselors (*zhengzhi fudao yuan*) who would be responsible for the moral and ideological well-being of about 200 students each (Ministry of Education, 2006).

As Yan Xiaojun has detailed, however, it is not so much the changed structure that has changed student behavior, as the way the organizational framework has been operated. In his view the system is essentially “depoliticized”, with surveillance and material incentives replacing ideological motivations (Yan Xiaojun, 2014). On the other hand, ideological and moral education is not absent from the mixture of measures taken to ensure some sorts of compliance from students. All students are required not only to take political and moral education classes each year of their university education but also to pass these classes before a degree can be awarded. In addition to those classes that are part of the curriculum, students are also required to attend politically and morally uplifting less formal sessions run by the Student Work Department, the CCP, and the CYL. There may also be and often are “special” occasions when students are required to attend information and education meetings. These might be related to planned events and their consequences—for example, the holding of the Youth Olympic Games in Nanjing in 2014—or unexpected events, such as the outbreak of a particular disease or problem in a locality. Either way, the dual goals of information, so

that students know what is going on and surveillance, so that they may be advised how to behave, are served.

Even so, it is not surveillance and organizational intervention that ensures the compliance of the student body so much as the dictates of the market. Vocational and professional training has been at the heart of the expansion of higher education. Most of the new institutions of higher education established since 1998 have been concerned with either vocational education or professional studies subject areas. Remarkably, by 2010, 71% of graduates were in the fields of science, engineering, agriculture, medicine or managerial science. (Ministry of Education, 2011: 34)

While it might be reasonably assumed that students in the professional, vocational and technical subject areas are less inclined to radical political activism compared to students in humanities, law, and the social sciences, this can only be a small part of the explanation. The market also plays its role in ensuring political compliance through the prospect of unemployment. Higher education graduates used to be guaranteed employment. Indeed, their institutions were often geared to producing so many new graduates each year to the professional and managerial labor force in particular administrative and economic systems, if not specific work units. The expansion of higher education and the (almost necessary as a result) abolition of the compulsory employment assignment system have led to increased and increasing competition for work, with reports each year of massive graduate unemployment (Huang and Bosler, 2014). Graduate unemployment within six months of course completion is estimated to be in excess of 15 percent (Sharma, 2014). It is no surprise then that in the course of four-year undergraduate and a three-year postgraduate coursework degree programs students spend most of their final year engaged in seeking employment.

The result of this fear of unemployment in terms of political positioning is clear. To quote Yan Xiaojun:

...students suffer from intense insecurity, self-doubt and anxiety about their future lives. Inevitably, these pressures lead many Chinese students to choose to detach themselves from China's critical intelligentsia and instead align themselves with a much more politically apathetic and compliant professional working class (Yan Xiaojun, 2014).


Not only is there little room for oppositional political activism, but the political impact for many university students is that they have been effectively marginalized. The only alternative is the adoption of activism within the Party-state.

The prospect of unemployment has not only acted to focus students away from political opposition and towards development of a place in the work force but has also led to increased demand for membership of and to some extent activism within the structures of the Party-state, effectively at university level, the CCP and CYL. In the past it was relatively rare for undergraduate students to be granted CCP membership. Now it has become more common for students to be admitted, with some 11% of all students being CCP members in 2010 (Yang, 2011). The incentive is of course future employment not only in the Party-state, but also throughout the vast network of economic enterprises both in the state and private sectors where CCP-influence and the political status of university connections may make a difference.

Conclusion: Higher education and social change

An examination of the consequences of the expansion of the higher education sector in the PRC certainly bears no indication of a propensity to radical social or political change. Social mobility appears largely unaffected by the expansion in the number of higher education places. It is clear that other measures need to be put into place if that goal is to be achieved, including more equal redistribution of income, provision of more and better quality publicly provided schooling, and probably the abolition of the household registration system. University teachers are so much part of the relatively small middle class that has benefitted disproportionately from economic growth in the reform era that they are both unlikely and unwilling to move into radical opposition. University students have been whipped into line by the exigencies of the employment market, and brought under firm control by the Party-state.

At the same time, this is not to say that there has been no change at all within the overall parameters of the Party-state. The voices of university teachers are heard alongside other those of other public intellectuals advocating more incremental change, particularly with respect to economic inequality, the abuse of political position by officials, and the establishment of a greater rule of law. In many ways this may be a more fundamental and sustainable

change than any expressivist desire for radical political change. The student body, despite its obvious economic and social problems, is also changing. Students remain no less hard-working and determined to succeed, but as any foreigner who teaches in a PRC institution of higher education will tell you, they are not limited in their world view in quite the same way their parents were or remain. Many connect regularly with sources of information and social media that are global, and their thinking, though shaped inevitably by their education and socialization is also expanding. 

Translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated.

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