Autonomy and control: The struggle of minban schools in China

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Abstract

Minban (private) secondary schools are a new phenomenon in China, which, theoretically, have greater freedom from government control. In practice, however, their autonomy is still limited, as is shown by this in-depth study of eight minban schools, though they have actively pursued strategies to obtain, defend, and expand their autonomy. Four principal school strategies are identified: isolation, avoidance, advocacy, and capitalization. Choice of strategy depends primarily on school type and its distance from the state. The government has refused to relinquish control by strengthening bureaucratic regulations and institutionalization, which explains the ongoing tension in the schools’ quest for autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Min is the Chinese word for ‘the people’, and minban means ‘operated by the people’. In China, these terms are used to describe private sector organizations. The re-emergence of the private sector is a defining characteristic of China’s current transitional society: minban schools are a product of the market reforms and decentralization of the 1980s (Hannum et al., 2007).

Minban schools had been disbanded in the 1950s but gradually regained their status after the economic reforms of the early 1980s. Clause 19 of the Constitution (revised in 1982) states that the government encourages various sectors to provide education, which was reaffirmed by the First National Education Meeting held in 1986. A year later, the Compulsory Education Law granted minban education formal and recognized status within China’s educational system. In 1987, the Provisional Regulations on Schools required all local governments to take appropriate action to promote minban schools and address all operational problems.

Beginning in 1992, efforts were made to develop policies favourable to minban education. The Guidelines for the Reform and Development of Education in China, issued in 1993, established regulations instead of direct control over minban schools: guidelines and advice on issues such as funding, planning, and daily operation. Rules for The Implementation of Compulsory Education Law of The People’s Republic of China (1992) and Vocational Education Law in People’s Republic of China (1996) confirmed the official position on the importance of minban education (Yan and Lin, 2004). These policies also clearly stated that public schools could be converted to public-run-min-assisted or min-run-public-assisted schools if the conditions were suitable. With the encouragement of the state, some regions experimented with pilot reforms. For example, several primary and secondary schools in Shanghai and Tianjin were chosen as pilot sites. In order to have greater autonomy, some public schools in Shanghai converted to minban schools (Zhu and Ip, 2002). The two official documents – Opinions on Promoting Development of General Senior Secondary School and Ten Measures on Strengthening Weak General Senior Secondary School (trial draft), issued in 1995 further encouraged groups and individuals to establish privately owned schools that would be operated by public sector (gongban minzhu), public-private joint-venture schools (minzhu gongban), or publicly owned schools that would be operated by the private sector (guoyou minban). Various forms of private involvement in the education sector were encouraged to enhance the development of education in China. The Ninth Five-Year Plan and Long-Term Objectives for the Year 2010, issued in 1996, declared that by 2010 minban schools would have a significant role, operating in parallel with public schools.

From the late 1990s, the government’s focus has been on clarifying minban policies and solving problems that have arisen. The Minban Education Promotion Law, passed in December 2002 by the Standing Committee of National People’s Congress, states that reasonable economic returns for investors in minban schools is permissible.

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In 2004, a series of reports concerning financial and academic mismanagement in minban schools led to public criticism and subsequent state intervention. The central government formally prohibited public schools conversion to minban schools, or operating associated minban schools, and reviewed the fee schedules. In 2006, the National Development and Reform Commission and the Educational Department jointly issued *Advice about Liquidating and Rectifying the Charge Fees of Converted Schools*, which prohibited approvals for school conversions.

In this period of seeming reversal of the reforms, confusion in policy documents and operations could be found. Non-compliance from local governments was also observed. In a sense, overall support for minban schools remained intact. The *Outline of National Medium-and Long-Term Program for Education Reform and Development*, issued in 2010, states that there will be more effort to support private education, and clarifying profit-making and non-profit-making private schools. The executive meeting of the State Council in 2015 approved draft amendments to laws relating to education, higher education, and private education. Amendments declared that private schools will be subjected to classified management and profit-making private schools are legally permitted. The National Education Working Conference 2015 urged the expanding of the autonomy of minban schools in teaching, recruitment of students, and tuition fees. Despite a stronger legal status and more autonomy, their plight was continuously challenged by policy changes and competition.

The government’s reactive stance meant that minban schools’ progress towards gaining legal status and autonomy has followed a circuitous route. Still, the prevalence of minban secondary and primary schools increased by 724% and 438%, respectively, from 1994 to 2007. During the same period, there has been a 36-fold increase in secondary school enrollment and a 21-fold increase in primary enrollment.

Chan and Wang (2009) hold that the development of minban schools is a product of the government’s ongoing controlled decentralization, which has included the privatization of education services. As a result of the process of decentralization, a potentially antagonistic dynamic has emerged: the central government wishes to maintain its control and ultimate power in directing the reforms, but local governments have been given more power to determine the details of the reforms. Operators of minban schools must manoeuvre within the space created by an uncertain and evolving institutional environment.

This complicated process raises interesting questions for the researcher. How much autonomy can the new minban schools enjoy? Do different types of minban schools enjoy different levels of autonomy, and do these levels reflect an ever-changing institutional environment? What strategies were adopted by minban schools to achieve their autonomy? Based on in-depth study of eight minban schools in China, this article seeks to answer these questions. This study provides a new classification of minban schools. Moving beyond a simple analysis of autonomy of minban schools from the state, it adopts an institutional perspective, and differentiates the level of autonomous of four types of minban school by their position in the education institutional environment. With firsthand data collected through in-depth case studies, this paper identifies specific strategies adopted by the four types of school, greatly enriching our understanding of minban schools in China.

### 2. The autonomy of minban schools under controlled decentralization

Chubb and Moe (1990) maintain that ‘a world of autonomous schools would be a world without educational bureaucrats’ (1990, p. 46), a view based on their belief that ‘the freer schools are from external control – the more autonomous, the less subject to bureaucratic constraint – the more likely they are to have effective organizations’ (1990, p. 187). Whitty (1997) holds that school autonomy is achieved by the devolution of decision-making from regional and district offices to individual schools (1997, p. 3). Hence, autonomous schools are those that have been given authority over budget allocation, personnel management, pedagogic design, school maintenance, and quality assessment and assurance (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009).

Since the 19th century, school autonomy has flourished and received political, educational, and philosophical support. In the 1980s, school autonomy was seen as an example of democratic participation and respect for local communities. As the school autonomy movement gained momentum in the 1990s, the focus turned towards efficient management of public funding, a common concern during the process of political decentralization and New Public Management. Currently, school autonomy is seen as a means of improving the quality of education and raising academic standards (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009). Measures to increase school autonomy have been initiated in developing countries, as well as developed countries such as England, Australia, Italy, the USA, North Africa, and China (Barrera-Osorio et al., 2009; Mok, 2001; Whitty, 1997). The resulting level of autonomy is a measure of the compatibility of two institutional environments: the governments and the school’s (Chubb and Moe, 1990).

In China, the state–school relationship under controlled decentralization has followed various paths. Painter and Mok (2008) argue that government reforms in China resulted in a two-pronged process of decentralization: from central to local government and from public to private enterprise. The movement from central to local government began in the 1980s when the state required new financial and administrative systems to ensure adequate funding for the nation’s schools (Hawkins, 2000).

The direction and progress of decentralization was controlled by the one-party government. In 1994, due to the poor financial management of some minban schools, the central government took back some of the controls it had granted to the schools, including their control over the appropriation of government funding (Bahl, 1998). The central government did not, however, reassume the responsibility to finance education: local governments were still required to find alternative sources of funding. Still, even half-hearted and ambiguous decentralization has loosened constraints and created more flexibility and greater autonomy, which allow local governments and other players to assert their own interests (Hawkins, 2000). There is greater toleration for the various experiments initiated by local governments and the schools themselves. The central government has updated the regulatory framework, placing greater emphasis on the state as a regulator and coordinator (Mok, 2003; Saich, 2002). Centralized control remained strong, for example, in the national curriculum and national testing (Chung, 2000). Overall, the central government has maintained control over policy parameters and performance standards but does not micromanage the schools (Chitty and Lawn, 1995, p. 141).

The process of decentralization from public to private enterprises transferred many responsibilities to the private sector, inevitably weakening state authority over schools (Mok, 1997; Ngok and Chan, 2003). In the 1990s, these changes were reflected by the growth of schools funded by the private sector or public–private partnerships.

Local governments have been encouraged by the central government to adopt market principles in education in order to gain greater self-sufficiency and profitability (Cheng and Delany, 1999, p. 49). Many local government officials are still committed to socialist ideology: education must serve the socialist economy and, more specifically, lay the foundation for the ‘four modernizations’
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