Occasional Paper No. 9

National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education

Teachers College, Columbia University

School Choice in People's Republic of China

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November 2000

Abstract - This is a paper is on the recent development in parental choice in basic education[1] in the People's Republic of China (China). It has two major objectives. First, it attempts to explain the origin and inherent tension in school choice by relating the recent development to historical changes and the larger societal contexts in post-1949 China. Second, based on studies in both Chinese and English sources, it identifies emerging changes in basic education related to increased school choice. Particular attention is given to the unique characteristics of interventions in school choice in China, the development of different types of non-government schools as alternatives to government education, the effort to introduce innovation in school governance and school curriculum, and increased parental and community voice in schooling *(abstract continues below).*

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[1] Basic education in China covers primary and secondary education. Primary education is generally of six years; and secondary education consists of three years of lower-secondary education and three-years of upper-secondary education. Compulsory education generally consists of six years of primary education and three years of lower-secondary education.

The paper is organized into five sections. The first section is an introduction to the subject; it explains what school choice means in China today. The second section explains why school choice has become an issue in urban China since the early 1990s. It highlights socio-economic development in Chinese society since 1978 and conflicting policies within the party-controlled State in post-1949 China. The discussion of the development of school choice and its impact is given in two sections: Section Three is a general overview of development in the country, and Section Four presents case studies in two major urban centers in China, Tianjin and Beijing. The last section is a summary; it also explores future development in school choice in China.

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Nature of School-Choice Phenomenon

The effort to accommodate parental choice in schooling is a rather recent phenomenon in education in China. In urban areas, schools are divided into districts or zones and the government's general policy on school assignment is that students go to the government school in their district of residence[2]. Parental choice in schools is a departure from this general policy and it can take one of the following forms:

(1) Allowing students to go to a government school in another district. The destination school is allowed to charge a relatively high school fee to such students;

(2) Allowing students with a lower examination score to enroll in a government school that requires a certain threshold score for admission. The student has to pay an admissions fee to the school;

(3) Allowing students to enroll in a "people-run" school (known as *minban* school in China) which usually charges a much higher school fee than government schools; and

(4) Allowing students to enroll in a traditional private school which usually charges the highest school fee.

Here government schools refer to schools sponsored by government agencies, funded by the State, and managed by government agencies at various levels[3]. Traditional private schools and people-run schools are non-government schools. Traditional private schools refer to schools sponsored and managed by a private individual or group, and funded by student tuition and other private sources. People-run schools are schools sponsored and managed by a community of people or a collective organization, and funded by resources from the community or collective organization, and from a variety of sources (student tuition, financial assistance from the State, etc.). They are non-government and non-private schools that lie some where between government schools and traditional private schools. There is a

[2] In a few cases, parents can petition to have their child go to school in the district where they work.
[3] In general, in rural areas, primary schools are currently administered and financed by government at the village level, lower-secondary schools by government at the township level, and upper-secondary schools by government at the county level (see Tsang, 1996). Administratively, cities are also divided into smaller units of districts and neighborhoods.

range of people-run schools; some are closer to government schools while others are closer to traditional private schools.

There are several reasons why parents choose to pay a high school fee to send their children to another school. First, parents want their children to study in a higher-quality school[4] so that they have a better chance of eventually going to college. The destination government school is usually a "key" government school, a "demonstration" government school, or an "experimental" government school that has a high rate of educational transition. Key schools are located throughout the country and are designated by the government to be the elite government schools and they admit the top achieving students. Demonstration and experimental schools are special government schools located in selected areas for certain educational purposes and are often affiliated with a university. Such schools are often associated with a high-quality teaching staff, an effective principal, better facilities, and more government investment. Some parents also send their children to people-run and traditional private schools so that their children do not get stuck in a low-quality neighborhood government school. Second, access to schooling is still an issue in many parts of China. By paying a school fee, parents can buy a place for their children who do not have the required examination scores. Third, some parents send their children to the traditional private schools because of a variety of taste-related or personal reasons. Some traditional private schools attract students by offering specialty programs (such as in the English language, computer, and music or arts). Some are boarding schools that appeal to parents with a busy work schedule, especially when both parents work and are away from home. So

[4] In China, parents often associate school quality with educational input (students, quality of teaching staff, school facilities), process (such as principal leadership and school management), and output (test scores and transition rates). A good teacher is one who has "heart" and dedication, in addition to having good subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical skills.

far, the school-choice phenomenon is confined primarily to urban areas where families have much higher income and can afford the high school fees[5].

School choice has become a major issue in urban China and has attracted the attention of various stakeholders of education. Educational quality has become a focus of government educational policy; and the large quality-gap among government schools is an underlying contributing factor of parental demand for choice. In a society that is getting relatively more open, government education decision-makers have begun to pay some attention to parents' demand for school choice. Principals of government schools are interested in raising additional revenue from choice students and are at the same time concerned about competition from non-government schools. Teachers of government schools have more income derived from choice students; they can also seek employment in non-government schools. Increased school choice is a controversial issue that reflects divergent views on the purposes of schooling.

Understanding School Choice: Origin and National Contexts

Historically and culturally, Chinese society places a high value on education. Having learning is a source of esteemed social status[6]. In imperial China, individuals spent years studying for the government's civil examination so as to become a government official. Parents are willing to incur significant sacrifice in order to improve the educational opportunities for their children.

[5] The admissions fee to a good school is often ten thousand yuan (around twelve hundred US dollars; the exchange rate is 8.29 yuan to one dollar) or more; and the annual tuition fee of a secondary school for "choice" students is several thousand yuan or more. Government primary and lower-secondary schools charge no tuition. Government upper-secondary schools may charge a tuition fee, which may be up to 200 yuan per year. Government schools do charge a number of school fees (e.g., sport fees, examination fees, etc.) which total about one to two hundred yuan across education levels and across areas (Tsang 1995 & 2000). In 1997, the annual per-capita disposable income of urban residents was 5,160 yuan and the per-capita net income of rural residents was 2,090 (State Statistical Bureau, 1998: 324). Compared to many other countries, China is still a very poor country.

Throughout their long history, Chinese people have acquired learning through both officially-run schools and traditional private schools (Sun, 1992; Qu, 1993). More than two thousand years ago, prominent educators like Confucius and Lao Tzu established private schools for the common people which broke the monopoly of officially-run schools. These two types of schools coexisted in the next two thousand years.

In the early 1900s and the Republic of China era, private education received two new sources of sponsorship. First, some private schools were founded by Chinese educators who received their education overseas; and prominently among them were Tao Xingzhi and Yan Yangchuen (Deng 1997). These educators were motivated by a strong value of social service to spread learning among the masses and much of their effort was directed at the rural population. Second, along with western imperialism in China, missionaries came to China to spread the gospel and establish schools. Some of the more reputable education institutions in China today were originally established at that time (Fairbank, 1987: Chapter 11). Some well-known overseas educators, such as John Dewey of the United States, also came to China to promote western philosophy and educational ideas. Again, parental choice in schooling was not restricted to government educational institutions only. The education system during the Republican China period tended to be fragmented and highly differentiated, with limited access that favored students from privileged backgrounds. Families from well-to-do backgrounds undoubtedly had more schooling options for their children.

Education experienced a radical transformation since 1949, with the founding of the People's Republic of China. Traditional private education institutions at all levels were promptly converted to government institutions by the new government. Between 1949 and

[6] There is a Chinese saying that "Everything else is inferior, only education is of superior status."

the early 1990s, traditional private education vanished in the Chinese education system. The conversion was consistent with the heavy emphasis on the role of the State in a socialist country; it was also motivated by the government's attempt to rid the country of western influences and to remove educational differences due to school type which was thought to be related to the socio-economic background of parents. The egalitarian ideal was strong, in society and in school. School choice was not made available to parents. Between 1949 and the early 1980s, the collective or nationalist ideology was dominant, and individual goals were submerged in favor of social goals. During the post-1949 period, expanding educational access was consistently a focus of educational policy. Over time, the government managed to essentially achieve universal primary education, and by 1985 the major educational goal was universal compulsory education by around 2000 (People's Press, 1985). Access to higher levels of schooling was purportedly based on merit, particularly on performance in examination. However, government spending on education was persistently low, both in terms of national-effort and fiscal-effort indicators[7]. This low-spending level imposed a serious constraint on educational development in China and contributed partly to the school choice problem in the 1990s.

While only government schools were found in urban areas during much of the post-1949 period, many of the primary schools in villages in the rural areas were not government schools in the traditional sense. They were "people-run (*minban)* schools with government assistance." These schools were sponsored and managed by the community of people in the village and were financed primarily from resources of the village community. The teachers

[7] National effort indicator is defined as government education spending as a percentage of GNP (or GDP). During much of the post-1949 period, China national effort was between 2.0-2.5%, compared to an average of about 4% for developing countries. Fiscal effort indicator is defined as government education spending as a percentage of total government spending. China's fiscal effort indicators ran between 6-10%, compared to an average of 16% for developing countries. See Tsang (1994 and 1988).

were known as *minban* teachers; they were hired and financially supported by the village community and not the government. The majority of rural primary teachers were *minban* teachers. Initially, many of the schools were constructed from contributions, in kind and in cash, from the village community. The term "people-run" has a mass or community connotation to it and is distinctively different from private individuals or groups. People-run primary schools in rural China were an invention of the Chinese Community Party (CCP) to promote basic literacy to the rural masses, based on the approach of "people's education to be run by the people." (Lai, 1994). Since the early 1980s, the Chinese government took a more active role in the support of rural people-run schools. Initially, the government provided a monthly stipend to *minban* teachers in order to improve their living conditions; it then subsequently implemented a plan to convert *minban* teachers into *gongban* teachers (teachers hired by the government) over a number of years (World Bank, 1991). Also, both the village community and the government shared in the major repair of schools and in the construction of new schools. Thus, people-run primary schools are moving towards government schools in rural China. Secondary schools in rural China are generally government schools; they used to have a small percentage of *minban* teachers who were later converted into *gongban* teachers. In much of the post-1949 period in rural China, parents were eager to have a school in their community for their children, having a choice in school was a luxury.

In recent years, the government's willingness to allow more parental choice in school through the development of people-run schools and traditional private schools in urban areas represents a clear break with past educational policy and ideology. The government gave a green light to encourage the establishment of non-government schools in its Outline of Chinese Education Reform and Development in 1993 (State Council, 1993). Article 16 of

this Outline states that “The State adopts a policy of active encouragement, vigorous support, correct guidelines, and enhanced management toward the lawful establishment of schools by social groups and individual citizens.” Obviously, having schools run by social groups and individuals is not a new idea. Traditional private schools existed before the founding of the People’s Republic and people-run schools were common in rural China. What was new in 1993 was the decision to break the monopoly of government schools in urban areas. The government’s decision reflected the fundamental changes in Chinese society and in the policy of the CCP since 1978.

Observers of post-1949 China point out that the CCP, which controls the Chinese State, is not monolithic; but rather it has two competing factions, labeled as the radicals and the moderates, which differ fundamentally in their policies for national development and for education (Townsend, 1980; Tsang, 1991; Montaperto & Henderson, 1979). Briefly, the radicals argue that socialist national development is to be achieved through continuing class struggles and revolution to transform the social relation of production, with the objective of maintaining the uncontested dictatorship of the State by the proletariat class. The process of socialist national development is characterized by the active grass-root level participation of the masses in all aspects of social life and by constant consciousness raising of the masses in communist ideals though political campaigns and educational means. Politics and ideology are at the core of social life. Schools are an important instrument in political and ideological education. The education system should promote social equality and ideological “redness,” and not reproducing socio-economic inequality and encouraging individualistic goals. The ideological contents of the curriculum need to be tightly controlled and teachers should have the appropriate political credentials. The radicals oppose stratification in schools and the

national university entrance examination. They had complete control of the State (with the education system within it) during the period of the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76.

The moderates, on the other hand, believe that the first key step in socialist national development is the transformation of the forces of production, within the ultimate goal of achieving material (and moral) improvement of people's life. The process is mostly economic and technical, and much less political and ideological. The development and application of science and technology, as well as the employment of a skilled labor force, are important strategies in economic transformation. The education system has an important role to play in developing and nurturing the "expertise" required in economic production. They favor the establishment of key schools and universities for high-achieving students, the use of competitive examination for educational selection, and the use of general and vocational schools for socio-economic streaming. They have been in power in China since 1978[8].

Deng Xiaoping was the supreme leader of the CCP and the Chinese State from 1978 until his death in 1997. He and his followers reversed the national and educational policies of the radical faction. Through a successful implementation of the twin policies of reform and opening-up to the outside world, the Chinese economy grew rapidly and the average living standard of the Chinese people has improved substantially (Dernberger, 1999). In 1992, Deng toured southern China and reaffirmed the twin policies and the market-oriented economic experimentation in the special economic zone of Shenzhen. His tour subsequently unleashed additional momentum for reform in the economy and in other sectors. His remarks also provided the foundation for a national policy for increasing the

[8] The moderates have not been completely in power since 1978; radical or "conservative" forces can still be found inside the CCP. For example, within the leadership in the central education bureaucracy (known as

role of non-government initiatives in different sectors. The 1993 Outline of Chinese Education Reform and Development presented the official policy for encouraging non-government education in China[9].

A number of changes in Chinese society since 1978 have contributed to the parental demand for school choice in school and the development of non-government schools in the 1990s to accommodate parental choice. First, the twin policies of reform and opening up have not only contributed to rapid growth of the national economy, but also to a relatively more tolerant political environment in which citizens can begin to speak their mind. Chinese citizens are less likely to blindly believe in their political leaders. Corruption and conflicts within the CCP over the years have weakened the legitimacy of party leadership in China. Many political leaders and citizens alike recognize the important but daunting task of moving Chinese governance from "rule of people" to "rule of law." And government officials, including those in educational bureaucracies, are relatively more willing to hear what the common people have to say. For example, both the National People's Congress (NPC) and the National People's Consultative Congress (NPPCC) use survey and study teams to sample public opinions and parents' desire. Parents can voice their preference for school choice through the education subcommittees in the NPC and NPPCC.

Second, with economic progress and improved material resources, families want more and better education for their children. Chinese families have a high savings rate and they are willing to increase their consumption on education and restrict their spending on other goods and services. The high cultural value that families place on education is an

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the State Education Commission or the Ministry of Education at various times), there has been a changing balance between the radicals and the moderates over time.

[9] The central government first announced a temporary regulation in 1987 permitting the establishment of schools by "social forces." But the 1993 Outline was the definitive government policy to encourage non-government educational institutions as part of the education system.

important source of social support for education. A significant number of families in urban areas can afford the high costs of people-run and traditional private schooling. Parental interest in education is also intensified by the government's one-child policy in urban areas. The only-child in urban families is often treated like a prince or princess by their parents and grand-parents.

Third, reform policies since 1978 have also contributed to substantial and even widening economic disparities across areas and regions in the countries (World Bank 1998; Li & Zhao, 1999) and in disparities within education (Tsang 1994; Jiang, et. al., 2000). There are large differences in quality (and in transition rates) between key schools and regular schools. Quality differences between schools are more pronounced at the secondary level than at the primary level. Parents not only want their child to get into a school, they also want their child to get into a key school. Educational competition begins early in life, in pre-school and in early primary grades. Parents with children stuck in a local-quality school are eager to seek a way out. The high cultural value on education and the large gap in quality among schools constitute the driving force for school choice.

Fourth, the reform in educational financing since the mid-1980s has been a contributing factor to educational disparities and to the urge to seek alternative resources for the education sector. The reform was based on two financing strategies: financial decentralization in which financing responsibility is delegated to local governments, and resource diversification in which both government and non-government resources were mobilized for education (Tsang, 1996[10]). However, with little fiscal equalization through

[10] In China, resources for education are put under budgetary resources and out-of-budget categories. Budgetary resources are from government allocation. Out-of-budget resources consist of education levies and surcharges, school fees, work study, social (domestic) contributions, and overseas contributions. Non-government resources fall under the out-of-budget category. Different localities differ significantly in their capacity to raise out-of-budget resources for education.

intergovernmental education grants, the reform leads to the expected result of substantial financial inequality among areas and regions in the country. Not only is the distribution of educational resources uneven, the total amount of national spending on education has been consistently low. School principals in China have the important task of raising additional revenue, for example, to augment the meager income of teachers and to improve the physical conditions of their school. Charging school fees is an attractive way to raise school income. People-run schools and traditional private schools can charge high fees and are subject to fewer regulations than government schools.

Fifth, economic reform in China since 1978 has led to a diminished role of the State in economic production and to an increased reliance on market forces. Breaking the monopolistic role of the State in education is seen by some policy makers as an extension of what is happening in the economic sector. People-run schools in urban areas are an extension of people-run schools in rural areas; and traditional private schools have a long history in Chinese education[11].

Taken together, these several changes combined to spark the development of non-government schools in urban areas to accommodate parental demand for school choice in the early 1990s, despite lack of choice and negative attitude toward individualistic goals and traditional private schools in the four decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China[12]. The rapid development of non-government schools in the urban areas since 1993 has its unique features; and increasing parental choice in school has been a subject of intense

[11] There has been increasing interaction between China and the outside world since 1978. One may legitimately speculate that external exposure has some impact on education thinking in China, including the interest in school choice.

[12] The development of non-government education since 1978 can be roughly divided into three stages (Hu, 1999): an initial exploratory stage during 1978-1987 to gain acceptance of the concept of non-government initiatives in education, a slow development stage during 1987-1991 to actually experiment with non-government schools, and a rapid development stage since 1992 in which non-government schools have increased significantly and are more widely accepted as supplemental to government schools.

debate among key stakeholders of education in China. To get a better understanding of these features and tensions, one must recognize the Chinese contexts and the focus of educational policies in the 1990s.

China is a huge country with immense diversities and disparities, in terms of its peoples, geographical areas, cultural practices, religious beliefs, and socio-economic development. Educational development is likely to be different in different part of the country. A uniform educational policy is often not applicable across the country; local adaptation and modification are necessary.

Politics and decision regarding major policies have so far been largely confined to the State and party hierarchies (Pye, 1999), even though there is now some initial experimentation to allow local election of government officials by the people and to allow non-threatening non-state social and political groups (Burns, 1999). People's input to policy has to go through government-controlled people's congresses at various levels. Despite the loss of some popular legitimacy, the CCP has so far demonstrated its ability to adapt to changes and maintain its grip on power (Schoenhals, 1999). These features of Chinese politics have several implications for educational policy. The State and party hierarchies still maintain unchallenged power for setting education policy. Conflicts and power struggle within the State and party hierarchies often lead to abrupt changes and even reversals in educational policies. Popular pressure for educational change has some possibility of being accommodated as long as it is not a threat to political stability and the party's power.

By the early 1990s, universal nine-year compulsory education was accomplished in most of the urban areas in China. The focus of educational policy in urban China was shifted towards the expansion of upper-secondary education and the improvement of "all-

rounded" educational quality at various levels[13]. The low-quality of some government schools, especially at the lower-secondary level, is of particular concern to both educational policy makers and to parents. Educational policy makers and parents both like to seek expanded opportunities for access to upper-secondary education. There is thus motivation to link efforts to improve quality and expand access to efforts to expand school choice.

There have been two persistent tensions in the goals of educational development in post-1949 China. The first is the tension between education for promoting social equality and education for economic efficiency; and the second is between education for inculcating socialist ideals and education for developing talents ("redness" vs. "expertise"). With its support for key educational institutions, the use of the national examination for educational selection, and the emphasis on science, technology, and productive skills, the current government's policy tends to favor education for economic efficiency and for developing talents. However, there is still a strong national ideology for social equality and social goals through education[14].

Problems in educational financing, particularly low educational spending and substantial disparity in financial health among schools and localities, remain a key issue in Chinese education today. Educational policy makers see school choice as an opportunity to mobilize additional resources to education and to use part of the additional resources for assisting low-quality government schools.

Overview of Development of Non-government Schools and Availability of School Choice

[13] "All-rounded" quality encompasses academic, moral, and physical development. A student has to achieve both expertise and redness (Li, 1997).

[14] Reducing excessive social inequality is seen by the CCP not only as a desirable social goal but also as being essential for maintaining social stability. In recent years, the government has paid more attention to economic development in western China (People's Daily, 2000) and to the achievement of universal compulsory education in poor rural areas (World Bank, 1999).

Non-government schools in urban China were basically non-existent in the four decades after the founding of the People's Republic of China. The "1993 Outline" really sparked the rapid growth of such schools in the past few years. In 1994, there was an estimated 500 registered non-governments schools in urban areas (Wu, 1994); and the number rose to about 4000 by the end of 1997, according to the Ministry of Education[15]. However, the pace of development of non-government schools varies across different urban areas in the country.

Table 1 presents the number of non-government schools (consisting of both people-run schools and traditional private schools[16]) and students by level in the four centrally-administered metropolitan areas in China. It shows that there was substantial variation in non-government enrollment by area and by education level. At both the primary and secondary levels, Tianjin was highest and Beijing the lowest among the four urban areas in terms of the proportion of non-government enrollment. In both Tianjin and Chongqing, the proportion of non-government students at the secondary level is quite significant. In fact, since the national policy to encourage non-governmental education was promulgated in 1993, the pace of development of non-government schools in these two areas has been quite remarkable. For these two urban areas, alternatives to government schools are definitely present and in fact are available to about ten percent of families with children in secondary schools. Although the proportion of non-government students is quite small in Beijing and Shanghai, the absolute number of non-government students is not small. In these two areas, school choice is still available to families with sufficient financial means.

[15] According to the government, non-government educational institutions at all levels enrolled a total of 10.66 million students and had a total teaching and non-teaching staff of 520,000 by the end of 1997 (People's Daily, 1998).

[16] Information on separate type of non-government schools is not available, partly because it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between people-run schools and traditional private schools.

For all four areas, the proportion of non-government enrollment at the secondary level was clearly higher than that at the primary level. This is consistent with the common observation that quality gap among schools is relatively small at the primary level than the secondary level. In addition, the proportion of non-government schools seems to be related to the intensity of the parental pressure for school choice. Information from Tianjin (Chen, et. al., 1998) indicates that lower-secondary education, which has the most intense problem in school choice, also has the highest proportion of non-government enrollment. For example, in 1997, the proportion was at 2.2% for primary education, 12.9% for lower-secondary education, and about 8.0% for upper-secondary education.

Table 1: Government and non-government schools in metropolitan areas*, 1997

Area / School level	Government Schools		Non-government Schools		% enrollment non-government
	No. schools	Enrollment	No. schools	Enrollment	
Beijing					
Elementary	2,696	977,323	4	3,129	0.32
General secondary	735	626,208	41	16,410	2.55
Vocational secondary	174	108,308	9	1,425	1.30
Shanghai					
Elementary	1,533	1,024,402	20	14,409	1.39
General secondary	825	744,337	78	24,338	3.17
Vocational secondary	75	102,852	2	1,078	1.04
Chongqing					
Elementary	16,261	2,854,307	125	19,694	0.69
General secondary	1,606	1,002,915	47	8,544	8.45
Vocational secondary	206	79,507	36	7,702	8.83
Tianjin					
Elementary		860,800		19,000	2.16
Secondary (general & vocational)		540,100		63,700	11.79

* Note: Beijing, Shanghai, Chongqing, and Tianjin are the four metropolitan areas in China reporting directly to the central government; they are at the level of a province in China's administrative structure.

Sources: Computed from information from Ministry of Education and Chen et. al. (1998: 37)

Not only do different urban areas vary in the pace of the development of choice schools, they also differ in the mix of choice schools available for parents (Chen, et. al., Qu, 1993; Hu, 1997; Kwong, 1997). In Tianjin, the majority of non-government students are found in people-run schools, not in traditional private schools. But in some of the southern cities like

Guangzhou and Shenzhen, the traditional private schools thrive and have grown rapidly in number. There is actually a range of people-run schools; some of them are more like government schools and others more than traditional private schools. But a popular type of non-government schools consists of those people-run schools that are affiliated with key government schools (more details in case study of Tianjin later in this paper). These affiliated schools are attractive because they draw upon the established reputation, management, teaching, and facility resources of the parent government key schools. Parents' reaction to traditional private schools has been mixed. In some urban areas (especially economically very advanced areas), traditional private schools are able to charge very high fees (e.g., a one-time admissions fee 30,000 yuan or more plus annual tuition fee at 15,000 yuan and more) so that they can pay high salaries to attract good teachers and to provide attractive facilities. Traditional private schools in other urban areas that do not have such income from school fees have more difficulty in recruiting good teachers and providing attractive facilities; and some of these schools were forced to close down because of financial difficulty. Even though China is in a transition from public ownership to more non-government ownership in the means of production, some members of society are still weary of the pursuit of private profit by some traditional private schools.

School choice has hastened the change in school governance in China. Even before the onset of the push for school choice in the early 1990s, China had started to experiment with a "principals' responsibility scheme" in school governance (China Education Yearbook Editorial Board, 1990). According to this scheme, government-school principals have more say in the utilization of the school budget. For example, a principal could choose to use a smaller teaching staff so as to raise the average teacher salaries; the principal could hire "contract" teachers instead of regular teachers to enhance flexibility in the employment of

school staff. The scheme was intended to increase decision-making power at the school level so that available resources would be more efficiently utilized. However, such discretionary power in government schools was quite limited. The school curriculum is still set by government educational bureaucracies and driven by competitive examinations; and it is difficult to fire under-performing regular teachers. The school principal is held accountable to the education bureaucracy. Nevertheless, this is an important change because, in Chinese education, effective leadership of the principal is considered a key element of an effective school.

Principals of non-government schools have more power than their government counterparts. They can make decisions regarding the admissions of students, the hiring of teachers, and the choosing of teaching materials, without getting prior approval from the concerned education bureaucracy. In particular, they can more easily dismiss school personnel and they can pay school personnel according to performance. In fact, non-government schools often rely on higher salaries to compete with key government schools for good teachers (Qu, 1994). In addition, non-government schools have more flexibility in their operation, including course offerings. Without having to obtain permission from the concerned education bureaucracy, these schools can make changes to their courses so as to respond to parental preferences and changing market conditions. Furthermore, principals of non-government schools generally report to a school board and not to government education officials. The school board often consists of members from different backgrounds in the local community. It is thus not surprising to find out that many government-school principals want similar power so that they can compete on more equal ground with non-government schools (see case on Beijing later in this paper). Thus, indirectly through the development of non-government schools, parents and other members

of civil society can exercise some degree of influence on government schools and the government education bureaucracy. It is hard to quantify such influences, but a new channel for "voice" in basic education is present.

While further research on the impact of school choice on the school curriculum is desirable, no published studies have indicated that school choice has so far had any significant impact on innovation in school curriculum or pedagogy. This situation is not difficult to understand. Schools in China, both government and non-government ones, are driven by the same competitive examination system. To most parents, a good school is one that has high student academic achievement and high transition rates with respect to the next schooling level. Secondary-school principals, for example, are careful not to depart too much from the prescribed curriculum of selected subjects in the national examination for admissions to post-secondary education. So far, Chinese educators have encountered a stiff challenge in promoting an "all-rounded" education within the confine of an examination-oriented system. Of course, both educational tradition and limited resources have limited the adoption of more student-centered pedagogy (instead of a teacher-centered pedagogy) in the classroom. Innovations in instruction must be in line with reform in educational assessment. As pointed out previously, some of the most popular non-government schools are those people-run schools that are affiliated with key government schools and with government demonstration schools. These schools want to duplicate the instructional model of their parent schools; and educational innovation for them is not the major marketing point.

This is not to say that there is no attempt to alter the curriculum and experiment with alternative pedagogy. For example, some traditional private schools offer additional

courses or classes that are not available in government schools[17]. A small number of traditional private schools use educational models (such as the Montessori model in the United States) from overseas and have students from both expatriate and domestic backgrounds. These features are attractive to some parents; but they are not pervasive. Actually, in recent years, Chinese educational leaders (and teachers alike) have begun to recognize the need to promote critical thinking and problem solving skills so that graduates of the education system can more effectively participate in an increasingly global and competitive economy. There is experimentation in government schools to alter classroom instruction from an overwhelmingly teacher-centered approach to one in which learning perspectives are incorporated. But such a shift in educational thinking is probably due more to the educational leaders' understanding of Chinese situation and their exposure to external ideas, and less to the impact of increased school choice.

Although increased school choice has gathered some momentum in the 1990s, it has not had a smooth sailing and the development of non-government schools has been a subject of intense debate in China. Many parents and educators are seriously concerned about increased educational inequity arising from income-based school choice; they still favor educational selection through a merit-based examination system. While not espousing absolute social equality, many members of Chinese society see school choice as contributing to increased stratification and inequality in education within the larger context of an increasingly unequal society[18]. There is still a clash between education for social equality and

[17] For example, a secondary school in Shanghai offers a second-language course in eleventh grade; and a private primary school in Shanghai offers foreign language and computer classes starting in first grade. Some educators point out that the study load for students in these schools are excessively heavy and may have negative impact on students' health (Qu, 1993).

[18] For example, some Chinese are alarmed at the substantial and widening socio-economic and educational disparities between the eastern coastal region and the western region, and between urban areas and rural areas. The widening disparities may eventually be politically destabilizing. It is apparent that there is more school choice in the more developed coastal region and in urban China.

education for economic efficiency. School choice may add to the focus on transition rates as the primary yardstick for measuring school success and may make it more difficult for schools to achieve all-rounded quality. While traditional private schools are thriving in some urban areas, there is still a negative societal attitude towards them because of the concern for private profit and the historical past of these schools. Some people see the conversion of some government schools into people-run schools in some urban areas as a form of corruption in that those public assets may eventually be passed into the hands of individuals[19]. In a society that is not yet democratic, the development of non-government schools is an opportunity both for popular input to educational policy and for reduced public accountability.

So far, the government is still supporting increased school choice and the development of non-government schools. In particular, they see increased school choice through non-government education as a way of mobilizing additional private resources for educational development. In China, parents do not get a voucher from the government to go to a non-government school; rather they pay a high school fee to enroll their children in such schools. Non-government schools are often required to transfer part of their tuition revenue to the concerned government bureaucracy that uses such money to assist low-quality government schools.

School Choice in Tianjin and Beijing[20]

[19] Well-connected individuals (including party members with power) are able to converted their political capital into physical capital. There is justified concerned that, as the government tries to reform state enterprises, some public productive assets have ended up in the hands of influential members of society (Li 1996; Liu 1996). The conversion of some government schools into people-run schools is the educational equivalent of the process in the economic sector.

[20] The discussion on Tianjin is based on the findings of a recent study by Chen et.al. (1998). The information on Beijing is based on inquiry conducted by this author in 1998; the author had discussion with

Tianjin is one of the four metropolitan areas in China directly administered by the central government. In 1997, it had a total population of 9.5 million and its urban residents had an average per-capital disposable income of 6,608 yuan, which was 28% above the national average (at 5,160 yuan). It is one of the special economic zones established along coastal China to experiment with market-oriented economic reform. Economically and educationally, it is among one of the most advanced areas in the country (State Statistical Bureau, 1998[21]). As an important industrial center in north-central China and in close proximity to Bohai Bay, it has had frequent interaction with the outside world in the post-imperial era and its residents have a relatively more open mind and are probably more receptive to change.

Tianjin is a leader among urban areas in its expansion of school choice and the development of non-government schools. The government in Tianjin has devised and implemented a four-prong policy to accommodate parental demand for school choice and to regulate the development of non-government schools. First, the government strictly limits choice students in government schools. In fact, government schools are forbidden to have choice students in compulsory education (primary and lower-secondary levels). The government assumes the responsibility of providing access to compulsory education in government schools for all the children. At the upper-secondary level, the government sets the rule for choice students in government schools. For example, it specifies which government schools to admit choice students, the number of choice students, the test score for admissions, and the amount of school fee for choice students.

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officials from the Ministry of Education and from the Beijing municipal government, school principals, teachers, and parents.

[21] In terms of per-capita disposable income of urban residents, Tianjin was fifth among 30 regions in the country in 1997, after Guangdong, Shanghai, Zhejiang, and Beijing. It had achieved universal nine-year compulsory education a few years ago and is moving towards universal 12-year basic education.

Second, the government accommodates school choice through its encouragement of the establishment of different types of non-government schools. The important point here is that the government made an early decision to allow school choice instead of actively fighting parental demand for school choice. With governmental encouragement, non-government enrollment reached 12.9% in lower-secondary education and about 8.0% in upper-secondary education by 1997. With the peak of the student population moving into upper-secondary education, the focus of school choice is shifting from lower-secondary education to upper-secondary education. And the government expects that non-government enrollment will reach about 10% at that level in the next few years.

Third, there is a strong government effort to regularize non-government schools to ensure adequate quality and proper operation. Through its issuing of over ten regulation documents, the Tianjin government specifies the rules and procedure for non-government schools in the areas of school management, finance and accounting, basic educational standards, student management, and others. Since many people-run schools are initially affiliated with a government school, the government requires that such schools achieve independence in four areas: school buildings, financial management, instructional management, and legal identity as an educational institution.

Fourth, the government requires all non-government schools to have a tuition fee of less than ten thousand yuan per academic year. This is to make non-government schools accessible to more families. These schools are also required to collect school fees on an annual or semester basis; they cannot have a one-time collection at the beginning unless they receive special permission from the government to address an unusual situation. In addition, non-government schools are required to give 10-15% of their tuition revenue to the district

education bureaucracy that will be used to improve and reform low-quality government schools in the same district.

According to the government of Tianjin, school choice in the 1990s has taken place within a larger context of the reform of the structure of basic education in the city. The development of non-government schools have been promoted to achieve several educational objectives: achieving the streaming of peak student population into schools at the lower-secondary level, moderating parental pressure for school choice, developing supplemental resources for basic education, and increasing school autonomy and more flexible use of educational resources.

Non-government schools in Tianjin are mostly of the people-run type. Many of them have gone through a process of incubation and development in association with a government school. A popular model is given in Figure 1. A people-run school starts as people-run classes or as a people-run mini-school within a well-regarded government school (usually a key/demonstration/experimental government school). After getting permission to establish people-run classes or a people-run school, the government school can recruit choice students and charge tuition fee[22]. Choice students receive instruction in the parent government school from teachers from the same school. Initially the "two" schools have the same legal identity, the same financial and accounting books, and the same campus. Over time, the "inside" school will "move out" of the parent school and become an affiliated school. The principal of this affiliated people-run school is usually a retired principal from another government school; but administratively this principal is often subject

[22] In China, compulsory education in government schools charge no tuition fee. But compulsory education is by no means "free" for parents. Parents have to incur education spending on textbooks and workbooks, writing supplies, school uniform, various school fees (examination fees, sports fee, etc.), and other items (boarding costs for some students). The total cost of such private educational spending can be a heavy burden for Chinese families, especially those from poor or rural backgrounds (Tsang, 1995 & Tsang 2000).

to the influence of the principal in the parent school. The affiliated people-run school is required by the education bureaucracy to achieve independence from the parent school in the four areas of school building, financial management, instructional management, and legal identity. Some teachers from the parent school work as contract teachers in the affiliated school and students from the affiliated school often continue to use the facilities of the parent school. In return, the affiliated school often pays up to about 30% of its tuition income to the parent school. In addition, the affiliated school is required to pay 10-15% of its tuition income to the education bureaucracy of the district in which it is located; this money is designated for assistance to low-quality government schools in the same district.

The key selling point of this type of people-run school is its connection to the well-regarded parent school. Choice parents hope that their children will receive a quality education because of the close association of the two schools. In fact, the affiliated people-run school often does not want to be too separate from the parent government school[23]. Additional income is the primary incentive for the parent government school. Both schools want to maintain their relationship. One way to do this is for the two schools to form a school group, governed by the same school board, with a different principal responsible for the educational affairs of each school. Thus, initially this type of school is a "government-run people-assisted" school. Later, it is transformed into a "people-run government assisted" school. And parents in Tianjin tend to favor this type of school over the traditional private schools. In addition to the negative societal view, traditional private schools have to deal with the problems of constructing or finding a school building, hiring competent

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Government upper-secondary schools can charge relatively low tuition fees which are set by the government.

[23] Having a separate campus can be a challenge for the affiliated people-run school because of the relatively high cost of school construction. It is easier for the people-run school to have separate financial and accounting books, a separate legal identity, and some instructional autonomy from the parent government school.

teachers, and paying competitive salaries and social insurance. In fact, because of the financial difficulty faced by traditional private schools[24], the Tianjin government does not require these schools to pay part of the tuition income to the government. There are other variations in non-government schools too. For example, the district education bureaucracy may convert a highly dysfunctional government school into a people-run school and identify a retired principal to be the new principal of the new stand-alone people-run school.

Beijing is the national capital of China, and the cultural and political center of the country for many centuries. In 1997, it had a total population of 12.4 million and its urban residents had an average per-capital disposable income of 7,813 yuan, which was 51% above the national average (State Statistical Bureau, 1998). Like Tianjin, Beijing is one of the most advanced areas in the country in economic and educational terms and its residents are exposed to new ideas through interaction with the outside world and with other parts of the country. But compared to Tianjin, Beijing is much closer to the center of political power and has been at the very center of political upheavals in post-1949 China.

Compared to Tianjin, the development of non-government schools has been much slower. In 1997, for example, at the primary level, only four out of the 2,700 schools were non-government schools and the proportion of choice students was negligible. While relatively more non-government schools were found at the secondary level, non-government enrollment accounted for only 2.6% in secondary vocational schools and 1.3% in secondary vocational schools. Nevertheless, the total number of registered non-government schools did increase two-and-a-half times from 21 in 1994 to 54 in 1997 (Lai, 1994; Table 1).

[24] Part of the financial difficulty of the traditional private schools in Tianjin is the strict government regulation on tuition fee. The tuition policy is much more lax in Guangdong province. Traditional private schools are allowed to charge a high one-time admissions fee and high annual tuition fee. Guangdong province has the highest per-capita disposable income among its urban residents in the country; some families in areas like Shenzhen, Guangzhou, and the Pearl-Delta area are very rich and can afford the expensive private schools.

According to the Beijing Municipal Education Commission, the quality gap among government schools is not large at the primary level; differences in facilities and teaching staff are relatively bigger at the lower-secondary level. The government's basic policy is not to allow choice in government schools at the compulsory level (China Education Yearbook, 1998: 356). In fact, the two areas differ sharply in the extent of non-government education at the lower-secondary level.

A variety of non-government schools exist in Beijing. For example, there are stand-alone people-run schools that were converted from dysfunctional government schools. In these "government owned people-run" schools, the school assets belong to the government but the school enjoys the added autonomy of a people-run school[25]. The students from poor backgrounds originally in the government school are transferred to other government schools. The new people-run school is then allowed to charge high tuition fees (about 5,000 yuan per year). In addition, there are government schools which run people-run schools (similar to that in Figure 1), people-run schools sponsored and managed by companies, traditional private schools, and non-government schools run by other members of "social forces[26]." Interestingly, non-government schools in Beijing do not hesitate to use the word "sili" (private) in the school name. For example, among the twenty-one registered non-

[25] For example, in 1997, the municipal government of Beijing converted nine government schools into people-run schools (China Education Yearbook Editorial Board, 1998: 339-340). The new principals will have a school budget based on the government-school norm. But they have more autonomy in school management, as indicated in the paper earlier. In a sense, the district education bureaucracy is contracting the running of the school to an individual or community group.

[26] In the Chinese context, "social forces" refer to various elements of the non-State sector; they include individuals, private groups, community groups, large social groups, and other-non-State organizations (e.g., non-state enterprises). In may be noted here that schools run by community groups and by companies are not a new phenomenon. As pointed out before, many rural schools have been run by the village community since 1949. In urban areas, during various times in post-1949, the government did encourage some companies to run their own schools, generally as a way of expanding access to schooling and occasionally as a strategy to relate schooling to work. But in earlier times, students were not charged with high school fees.

government schools in 1994, eleven had the word “sili” in their name, two had “people-run” in their name, and the rest did not use “sili” nor people-run (Lai, 1994).

Educators in Beijing point out that the best schools in Beijing now are still government schools. Most non-government schools are around the middle of all schools in terms of quality. The highest achieving students are assigned to the top government schools; and choice students (though generally from relatively well-to-do families) are not necessarily the most talented ones. However, despite the relatively small size of the non-government sector, principals from government schools, including those from the reputable ones, are concerned about competition with non-government schools. These government-school principals feel that they do not compete with their non-government counterparts on a level playing field. They point out that non-government schools can charge high tuition fee and have more decision-making power. They are particularly concerned about the loss of competent teachers to non-government schools. They do not fear competition with non-government schools if there is a level playing field. With their advantages, some non-government schools may become the top schools in the future.

There are some strong similarities in school-choice policies among the two areas. For example, people-run schools in both areas are required to transfer a portion of their tuition income to the district educational bureaucracy that is used for assisting low-quality government schools (15% in Beijing, and 10-15% in Tianjin). Both areas have very strict limit on school choice in government schools in compulsory education; school choice is largely effected through non-government schools. This is consistent with the national policy that compulsory education should be made accessible to all and that compulsory education should be primarily government education. Non-government schools have more autonomy and decision-maker powers than their government counterparts.

There are several possible reasons to explain the different rate of development of non-government education between Tianjin and Beijing. First, being in the national capital, educational decision-makers in the municipal government are more cautious about change in educational policy and about large-scale and rapid educational experimentation[27].

Second, educational decision-makers in the two areas appear to have a major difference in their focus in the reform in basic education. Educational decision-makers in Tianjin decided early that they would accommodate parental demand for school choice through their more active encouragement of the establishment of non-government schools. At the same time, the Tianjin government uses tuition income (plus government resources) from non-government schools to assist low-quality government schools. In Beijing, a major focus in basic education is the improvement of the quality of low-quality government schools. The mayor and leaders from the Beijing's People's Congress, the Beijing Education Commission, and the Beijing Finance Bureau all place a high priority on the improvement and reform of low-quality government school; and additional resources from both government and non-government sources are mobilized to support such an effort. For example, between 1996-98, a total of three hundred million yuan was used on such an effort. By 1998, 80% of government schools previously in the low-quality category achieved the teaching and facility standards set by the government. And, according to the municipal government, quality gap among schools has decreased after 1998, and students are allocated to neighborhood schools based on examination results. Revenue from non-government schools was a funding source for the effort to improve the quality of low-achieving government schools.

[27] Some observers point out that decision-makers in metropolitan Beijing, compared to those in other coastal and particularly southern urban areas, are more conservative in their policies and are not the first to experiment with radical change because of the location of central power.

Third, one may speculate that the wider access to upper-secondary and university education through government educational institutions in Beijing may have maintained the people's belief in the effectiveness of government education. For example, the enrollment ratio in upper-secondary education for urban residents in the Beijing Metropolitan area is estimated to be 95% in 2000. With a relatively large number of universities located in Beijing, the gross enrollment ratio for Beijing residents is about 30%[28] at the university level.

Summary and Discussion

Increased school choice is a rather recent development in education in the People's Republic of China. It represents a clear departure from official education policy for four decades after 1949. However, the accommodation of parental choice through the development of non-government schools since the early 1990s has not been undertaken in isolation from other educational issues. Rather it has been incorporated into the larger effort to address key concerns in basic education, such as the improvement of the quality of low-quality government schools and the mobilization of additional resources for the education sector. Since it is a national policy that the State has the primary responsibility for the universalization of compulsory education, particularly through government funded and operated schools, school choice has been severely restricted in government schools at this level. The State does allow school choice in non-government schools in both compulsory education and post-compulsory education. School choice and the development of non-government schools have proceeded at widely different pace and form in different areas in China. Local education policy and disparities in socio-economic conditions as well as in cultural and political tradition are important explanatory factors. Figure 2 summarizes the

[28] The national average is around 9%. In 1997, Beijing had 65 regular higher educational institutions and 196,082 undergraduate students while Tianjian had 20 institutions and 73,830 undergraduate students

different kinds of schools in China today. School choice has so far been mainly an urban phenomenon. While different types of non-government schools can be found in a given urban area, the elitist traditional private schools tend to be more common in the economically most advanced areas in China.

Table 2: Different types of schools in China

FINANCING:	PROVISION OF SCHOOLING Government	People-Run	Private
Government	Traditional government school*	People-run government assisted school People-run school affiliated with government school People-run school owned by government (converted school)	
People (community)	Government-run people assisted school	Stand-alone people-run school Rural people-run school	
Private (individual/group)	Government-run privately assisted school		Traditional private Schools

* In China, traditional government school (government run and government financed) often receive financial support from community groups and from individuals.

The development of non-government schools has been credited with providing school choice for some parents and with generating additional resources for basic education, particularly for assisting low-quality government schools. But it has also been criticized for increasing differentiation in education, introducing additional inequity in access to knowledge, and in reinforcing the tendency towards "expertise." The controversy reflects enduring tension between equality and efficiency, and between redness and expertise in education in post-1949 China.

The development of non-government schools does lead to more schooling alternatives for parents. School choice is available only to the most well-to-do families in

(Ministry of Education, 1998: 116). The gross enrollment ratio is much less than 30% in Tianjian.

some urban areas but to relatively more families in other areas. Some local governments close down the most dysfunctional government schools and convert them to non-government schools while others make the improvement of low-quality government schools the focus of their effort in basic education. As part of the State's policy of increasing autonomy and decision-making at the school level, non-government schools actually provide a place for testing some of the ideas in the reform of school governance. In fact, principals from government schools want to have the same additional power given to principals of non-government schools. School choice probably hastens the pace of the reform of school governance that will eventually alter the role of the State in education. While there are efforts to introduce innovative instructional strategies and additional curricular features in some non-government schools, their overall impact is probably very small because of the strong influence of the examination system. School choice does give some voice to parents and community groups, though there should be no illusion as to who ultimately makes the decision. In China today, it is not a meaningful exercise to compare the cost-effectiveness of government and non-government schools because of the way that students are allocated to schools and the different regulations and practices governing schools.

Predicting what will happen in education in China is more an art than a science, and many experts or observers on China have been proven wrong in their prediction in the past. If the government maintains its twin policies of reform and opening-up to the outside world, and if the country continues to make economic progress and Chinese society continues to become more open, the demand for school choice will intensify. In urban areas, the focus of school choice is shifting (or will be for some areas) from lower-secondary education to upper-secondary education. And school choice will become an issue in some rural areas in

the near future. It is not a matter of whether or not to allow school choice, but a matter of how to manage school choice throughout the country.

Recognizing the difficult historical circumstances before 1949, the low level of economic development, as well as the diversities and tensions within the country, one may say that the People's Republic of China has made substantial and significant achievement in the education of its people since 1949 (World Bank, 1999). Despite some weaknesses, the education system, which has been mainly government education, has been functional so far. The issue is not replacing government education with non-government education, but how to enrich the education system and address some of its weakness with non-government education. A differentiation of educational policy by educational level is useful.

There is common consensus on the role of compulsory education in the socio-economic, cultural, and political development of a nation and its people (Inter-Agency Commission, 1990); and access to quality compulsory education is often considered to be a basic human right. Thus assuring access for children from all backgrounds and promoting equality in access to knowledge are fundamental goals in compulsory education. The government should have strong involvement at this level. In present-day China, government education at the compulsory level is functional. On both efficiency and equality grounds, the focus of policy at this level should be the expansion of access to quality government compulsory education in rural areas and the improvement of the quality of low-quality government schools in all areas. The State has to ensure that adequate resources from various sources are available to support compulsory educational development. A recent study has documented the low public spending on education and the highly uneven distribution of educational resources in China (World Bank, 1999). It suggests that the government should substantially increase its spending on education over time and that an

intergovernmental scheme in education be developed to both target resources for poor areas and to reduce financial disparities among areas. There is ample room for raising additional government revenue because the "public finance rate" (total government revenue from tax and non-tax sources as percentage of GDP) is relatively low for China and that the efficiency in tax collection can be improved over time. Strengthening government financing of compulsory education will enhance efficiency and equality and reduce inequality due to school choice.

In post-compulsory education, families have a larger responsibility in sharinsg the costs of education. Non-government educational institutions can have an important role to play in expanding access to post-compulsory education and providing educational alternatives to accommodate the diverse preferences of parents[29]. In addition to running educational institutions, the State can modify its role with respect to non-government education, for example, by providing and enforcing a legal framework, defining, monitoring and enforcing minimally-adequate quality standards, facilitating access to information about school, defining management and governance structures, and facilitating an adequate supply of qualified teachers. Given the large differences across the country, State policies should allow for local adaptation and variation.

[29] The case for non-government education is particularly strong in college and university education. In fact, the Chinese government has started to expand higher education at a much faster rate than before, particularly through the expansion of non-government colleges and universities.

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