



# Rural Education in Mainland China

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Dr Wang Dan's research focuses on equity and social justice in rural education in China. The modern Chinese educational system follows the Western educational model in terms of curriculum, time structure and school organization. It is worth noting that a significant function of modern education in Western countries is to meet the demands of urbanization, industrialization and capitalism. Therefore, when China imported the Western model of education 100 years ago, it also imported the intrinsic discrimination against rural communities -- financially, institutionally and culturally.

**The crisis in rural education in China is not a unique problem to China.**

Today, rural students in China continue to experience the entrenched disadvantages in curriculum, instruction and school staffing, compared with their urban peers. Even worse, the rural-urban disparities are exacerbated by the neoliberal policies of commodification, privatization and marketization in recent decades. The study of rural education in China has to disentangle the complicated relationships between China and the West, the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, and most importantly between capitalism and socialism.

Dr Wang's recent studies analyse the profound impact of neoliberal economic reforms in China on teachers' work in rural schools. In the context of rising social inequalities brought about by the reforms, one of the biggest concerns facing rural schools was that morale among teachers was at rock bottom. Teachers felt isolated, left behind to teach second-tier children in woefully underfunded schools, abandoned by the state, subject to authoritarian administration on campus, and commanding no respect from community. On top of this, teachers, both rural and urban, express strong concerns about the decline of social mores and increasing domains of life dictated by money.

Some teachers are found to apply market rationalism in their own work, coercing students to pay arbitrary fees to improve teachers' incomes.

These poignant findings cut across the dichotomy of rural and urban education. The rural-urban divide is conspicuous, on the one hand, in sharp disparities in the distribution of educational resources. However, Dr Wang's research exposes the paucity of the resource theory and reveals the deeper cultural and moral crisis in rural schools and in larger society in general. She asks the question: given adequate educational resources, where should rural education go? The urban model, i.e. the modern educational model borrowed from the capitalist West, is encroached by commodification, individualism, elitism and commercialism, which have engendered the moral and ethical crisis that exists among teaching staff. Should rural education continue on this path?

The rural problem has always been a fundamental problem in the development of capitalism. Here once again, rural education in China reflects the symptoms of systemic illnesses, not merely in rural schools or communities, but for the entire educational and economic system. Educational problems in China are rooted – like everywhere else – in the economic realm not in education itself. Education as a means to serve economic ends distorts the original humanistic purpose of education. Competition in the labour market compels individuals to treat education as an investment. The market never stops producing winners and losers. It intensifies the competition and reinforces the hierarchy in the school system. The result is the growth of elite schools which get more and more resources while poor rural schools keep losing ground. Culturally, both urban and rural schools yield to the economic rationalism that tends to displace educational aims and professional ethics.

In her current teaching and research, Dr Wang endeavours to identify or re-discover the innovative practices by Chinese educators, both in the past and at present, that effectively combat inequalities in the modern educational system. The crisis in rural education in China is not a unique problem to China. Rather, it reflects intrinsic flaws in the general model of modern education. Therefore, the Chinese lessons and experiences may shed light on educational development in many countries to help enhance equity and social justice.

Dr Wang Dan is Associate Professor in the Division of Policy, Administration & Social Sciences Education. Her research interests include the sociology of education, rural education in China, teachers and the workplace, organizational studies in schools and school leadership.