

1-8-2013

Education under China's Market Economy: A Case Study of Urban and Rural Teachers in Hunan Province

Qing Li

Towson University, li@towson.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci>

Recommended Citation

Li, Qing (2012) "Education under China's Market Economy: A Case Study of Urban and Rural Teachers in Hunan Province," *Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale*: Vol. 41: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/cie-eci/vol41/iss2/5>

This Research paper/Rapport de recherche is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Canadian and International Education / Education canadienne et internationale by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact kmarshal@uwo.ca.

**Disparities between Urban and Rural Teachers under China's Market
Economy: A Case Study of Hunan Province**
**Inégalités entre professeurs ruraux et urbains sous l'ère de l'économie de
marché chinoise: une étude de cas de la province de Hunan**

Qing Li, Towson University

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to investigate the working and living conditions of teachers under China's market economy, with a focus on urban and rural schools disparities. This paper is a case study of teachers in Hunan province, representing Central China. A total of eighteen teachers in seven different schools participated in the study. The analysis of data shows that teachers experience change of teaching as reflected in the shift to learner-centred approaches, as well as changes of curriculum, textbooks and teacher evaluation. Under a market economy, the Chinese educational system still possesses urban rural inequalities, for the same or different reasons. The urban rural gap is reflected in teachers' salary, pensions, workload as well as their living working conditions.

Résumé

L'objectif principal de cet article est d'étudier les conditions de vie et de travail des professeurs chinois sous l'ère de l'économie de marché, et plus spécifiquement, d'étudier les écoles urbaines et rurales. Cet article est une étude de cas de professeurs de la province de Hunan, en Chine centrale. Dix huit professeurs issus de sept écoles différentes ont participé à cette étude. Les résultats montrent que les professeurs ressentent des changements liés aux nouvelles approches pédagogiques orientées vers les apprenants, aux changements de curriculum, de livres, ainsi que des changements liés à l'évaluation des professeurs. Sous l'ère de l'économie de marché, le système d'éducation chinois montre toujours des inégalités entre le monde rural et le monde urbain. Les raisons peuvent être les mêmes ou peuvent être différentes. Les inégalités entre rural et urbain s'observent surtout au niveau des salaires, de la retraite, de la quantité de travail ainsi qu'au niveau des conditions de vie et de travail.

Introduction

Urban and rural disparity in China has long been a topic of interest among Western and Chinese scholars. An earlier study (Knight & Shi, 1996), published in the UK, has demonstrated that rural urban differences are reflected in funding, ethnic and gender discrimination, among other issues. Rural schools, compared to their urban counterparts, have significantly less funding as well as more decentralized funding. More recent research (Wu, 2007; Yang, 2006) published in China has pointed to similar urban rural inequalities such as funding, resources, and average years of education.

However, China has experienced drastic changes in the last three decades. Data from 1978-2001 indicated that the rural net income per capita

increased from 133.6 yuan (\$20.88 CAD) to 2366.4 yuan (\$369.85 CAD), a 7.3% growth every year, while the poverty incidence rate in rural regions decreased from 30.7% to 2% (Wang, 2003). While these data demonstrated ‘miraculous’ social and economic changes, little is known of its impact on narrowing the gap between the urban and rural education in China.

Under such drastic transformations, what happens to teachers? In what ways do the transformations impact urban-rural differences in education? This paper investigates the working and living conditions of teachers under China’s market economy. The primary goal is to explore the extent to which the market economy has helped reduce or eliminate, if any, urban-rural disparities in education, focusing on teachers.

Reporting on a case study of teachers in Hunan province, located in Central China, this paper begins with a review of literature related to Chinese teachers and the difference between urban and rural regions. Next, emerging changes and issues in curriculum reform are analyzed with respect to disparity between rural and urban education. Final discussion and conclusion are presented last.

In this paper, a market economy refers to an economy in which investment, production and distribution decisions are determined by supply and demand. A planned economy, in contrast, is an economy where investment and production decisions are centrally planned by the government (Gregory & Stuart, 2004).

Literature Review

One of the consequences of globalization is the widening gaps between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have nots’ in global society. One manifestation of such a gap under China’s market economy is the disparity between rural and urban education. According to Wang (2003), “children’s schooling difficulties in poverty-stricken areas, high dropout rates, widened educational disparity between urban and rural areas, and insufficient investments in rural education are among some of the most severe problems” (p. 1).

The gap between rural and urban schools in China has attracted attention in educational research (Knight & Shi, 1996; Tan, 2003; Wang & Li, 2009; Zhang & Lu, 2008). An earlier study exploring the disparity between rural and urban education in China showed that rural schools have not only significantly less funding but also more decentralized funding than their urban counterparts (Knight & Shi, 1996). Another disparity between urban and rural China is reflected in the ethnic and gender discrimination. For urban-dwellers under 30 years of age, no significant difference was identified between men and women’s

education. Rural women, however, are generally at an educational disadvantage. People with ethnic minority status are also at an educational disadvantage position in rural areas “despite the policies of positive discrimination” (p.115).

Moving to the market economy does not seem to bridge the gap between rural and urban education. For example, a recent study exploring the quality of compulsory education in West China identifies a large gap between rural and urban schools (Wang & Li, 2009). They found that some rural elementary schools fail to achieve the basic requirement of the curriculum standards; students in rural schools perform significantly more poorly than their urban counterparts in various subjects including math, English, and Chinese language arts. Further, rural elementary and high school students have a higher dropout and a lower graduation rate. Teaching quality is identified as the main factor contributing to such a big discrepancy between urban and rural education. Rural teachers, compared to urban teachers, are poorly trained and have fewer opportunities for professional development and support. Rural schools also have fewer leading teachers, and are more likely to have insufficient numbers of teachers than urban schools.

Other aspects relating to such regional disparity includes the fact that rural teachers tend to be older and less motivated to obtain further education (Bao, 2006; Wang & Li, 2009). Many rural teachers have to teach subjects that are not consistent with the major that they studied at universities or colleges, whereas such phenomenon in town and city schools is minimal. In rural schools, research and teaching reforms are difficult to develop and put into effect because leaders of town and countryside do not understand the importance of research on teacher development in these schools.

Teachers' wellbeing has also been investigated through the examination of their mental health (Gao & Yuan, 1995; Liao & Li, 2004; Zhang & Lu, 2008). These studies demonstrate that although the rates vary, in general, surprisingly high percentages of teachers were diagnosed to with psychological problems. These problems include, but are not limited to: depression, anxiety, and disturbance of interpersonal relations. Considering the widely dispersed findings presented in the existing literature regarding Chinese teachers' mental status, Zhang and Lu (2008) review teachers' mental health research in China since 1994 using meta-analysis. Their analysis reveals that rural teachers, compared with urban teachers, have more severe mental disorders. They conclude that the following factors are primarily contributed to the high diagnostic rate of teachers' mental disorders: rapid change of social and political environments; intensified conflict between different cultures and values; the abrupt change in cultural philosophy; changes in the educational system and high expectations on teachers;

constant change of information technology and mass media; and high competition in teaching.

The research exploring the impact of the transition from planned economy to market economy in China has also focused on the reform of teachers' employment system, namely from the traditional "Tongyi Fenpei" (TF, unified placement of all graduates) to "Jiaoshi Pinren Zhi" (JPZ, a free contract employment system). In the 1980s, some western scholars had already noticed the problems of the regional brain drain and possible inequity in education as a result of the 1985 educational reform in China (Lewin & Xu, 1989). They therefore advocated for the teacher's "contract of employment". Since the 1990s, Chinese studies revealed educational inequality, particularly between urban and rural schools (Bao, 2006). Niu (2009) reviews the existing literature related to such reform of teacher employment system and concludes that although the transfer of teachers' employment system from the traditional TF to JPZ enhanced teachers' motivation and working efficiency, it has nonetheless resulted in a brain drain of veteran teachers. This has consequently led to the huge gap of teaching quality between rural and urban regions. Rural teachers, compared to urban teachers, not only have lower salaries (sometimes paid in arrears for a long time) and no bonuses, worse medical care, and less funding and training opportunities, but also teach more students in larger classes with fewer resources and work in worse conditions. Due to such disparity, rural schools suffer from an outflow of rural veteran teachers to urban schools.

Methods

This paper adopted a case study method because this approach allows a holistic exploration of a single case from multiple perspectives, enabling complex patterns to emerge (Creswell, 2012). The case study methodology places "the researcher within the study so as to conduct research that is transformative (Creswell, 1998, p. 83)," therefore providing the means to investigate the specific urban rural disparities as reflected in teachers' experiences, beliefs and challenges. This case study was bounded by time (6 months data collection) and place (7 schools in Hunan Province). In this paper, suburban rural schools refer to schools in rural regions but in close proximity to a large or medium size city, while remote rural school refers to rural schools that are at least 10 km away from any large or medium size city/town. The urban, suburban rural, and remote rural areas in Hunan were purposefully selected to represent the wide spectrum of the geographic regions of the province.

Participants

A total of eighteen teachers in seven different schools voluntarily participated in the study. Six were from urban schools, six from suburban rural schools and another six from remote-rural schools. All nine female and nine male teachers were full time employees in *gongban* (i.e. public/government-funded and -managed) schools. See Table 1 for teachers' demographic information.

Table 1: Participants' Demographic Information

Name	Region*	Gender**	Minority or Not	Age Range	Teaching Experience (years)	Subject
L1	U	F	No	51-55	30	Math
L2	U	M	Yes	36-40	14	Math
O3	U	M	No	56 and up	39	Chinese LA
Y4	U	F	No	31-35	12	Chinese LA
L5	U	F	No	31-35	11	Math
W6	U	M	No	46-50	27	Biology
T7	S	M	No	31-35	8	Chinese LA
Y8	S	F	No	26-30	8	Chinese LA
L9	S	M	No	36-40	10	Chinese LA
S10	S	M	No	36-40	18	Math
Z11	S	M	No	31-35	13	Math
X12	S	M	No	46-50	27	Math
G13	R	F	No	26-30	5	English
Z14	R	F	Yes	31-35	10	English
Z15	R	F	No	31-35	10	English
Z16	R	F	No	31-35	10	English
C17	R	M	Yes	31-35	10	English
G18	R	F	Yes	Under 25	2	Chinese LA

*U: U * U: Urban, S: Suburban Rural, R: Remote Rural

**M: Male, F: Female

A snowball sampling approach was used to recruit participants. The criteria for participants were full-time teachers in *gongban* schools. Whenever possible, efforts were made to recruit teachers with diverse rather than homogenous demographics, backgrounds and experience. All teachers surveyed had bachelors' degrees in education. These teachers had diverse background and experiences, ranging from relatively new teachers to teachers with over thirty years of teaching experience. They were teaching different grades levels (junior or senior high) and a wide range of subjects, including math, Chinese language

arts, biology and English. Most of the teachers did not hold any administrative positions.

Data and Analysis

In this study, both quantitative and qualitative data were collected at the same time. Quantitative data were gathered via a survey of participants' demographic information and basic job-related facts. Qualitative data was collected via semi-structured individual interviews during 2010-2011. The face-to-face interview focused on teachers' experiences, exploring issues related to their remuneration, workload, and working and living conditions. All interviews were conducted in Chinese and audiotaped, and later transcribed. Each interview lasted between one and one-and-a-half hours. The project strictly followed the university's ethical regulations.

While this paper focuses on the teacher interviews, the quantitative data informed the analysis and provided contextual information. Adopting a 3-step process, the qualitative data analysis started with open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) of the transcripts by the researcher and a research assistant, working independently to identify recurring and salient themes. In the second step, the themes that naturally emerged were discussed in comparison with the existing literature of urban and rural education in China. The resulting initial codes were compared, discussed, and continued to be revised during our interaction with data until mutually agreed themes were developed. This allowed us to develop a coding system to probe teacher challenges and changes. Grouping the data under different codes allowed us to see different patterns and themes emerging. These different themes were interpreted within the broader social context. The naturally emerged themes were discussed in comparison with the existing literature in the field, allowing the creation of general categories from the full data set. In the third phase, a cross-case analysis was conducted via matrices and other displays to further condense the data and draw comparisons (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The coded information on each participant was summarized in matrices and then compared to cluster cases.

To ensure reliability and accuracy, we employed strategies including the collection of different types of data for triangulation, analyzing data independently by two researchers, looking for extreme cases, and paying particular attention to negative evidence (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

Context

This paper is a case study focusing on urban-rural disparities focusing on teachers in Hunan province. An important characteristic of case study is the use of thick descriptions to include details, context, and other elements of the case (Creswell, 1998). The thick description in this case study included the context information to help readers understand the teacher experiences and the urban rural teacher disparities.

Hunan, located to the south of the middle reaches of the Yangtze River and south Dongting Lake, is the home province of Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao). Sitting in Middle South China, its nominal GDP for 2010 was 1.59 trillion yuan (\$249.6 billion CAD) with per capita GDP of 30,226 yuan (\$4,715 CAD). Engel coefficient for Hunan is 39.9, indicating residences in Hunan have reached a comfortable living standard (Hunan, n.d.). Hunan is divided into 14 prefecture-level divisions. Amongst them, thirteen are prefecture-level cities and the 14th is an autonomous prefecture division called Xiangxi. Hunan has a population of 64,400,700 that includes 41 ethnic groups. About 90% of the people are Han and a little over 10% are minorities (Hunan, n.d.). The urban-rural gap still exists, although it has decreased in the last several decades. For example, the Hunan Economic Newspaper reported in 2010 that the ratio between urban and rural residences' income on average is 2.95:1 in 2010. This urban rural difference, however, significantly increased in Xiangxi autonomy prefecture division where this ratio becomes 3.91:1.

According to Hunan Provincial Department of Education (2007), Hunan has 17,108 elementary schools, 3,760 junior secondary schools, and 800 general senior secondary schools. There are 4,198,314 students and 246,112 full-time teachers in elementary schools; 2,972,610 students and 193,125 full-time teachers in junior secondary schools, and 1,318,513 students and 68,324 full time teachers in senior secondary schools.

As discussed earlier, teachers from seven schools - two schools in an urban region, two in a suburban rural, and three in remote rural regions - were selected purposefully to reflect their diverse demographics, geographic location, background, and experiences. All the schools are public schools, and are therefore funded by the government.

Of the two urban schools located in Changsha, one is a key senior secondary school and another is a typical high school with junior high and senior high students (grades 7-12).

Table 2: School information

School	Region /Location	Grade	Number of Students	Number of Participants
#1	Urban/ Changsha	Senior secondary (Grade 10-12)	4000	4
#2	Urban/Changsha	Combined Junior and Senior Secondary Grade 7 -12)	4800	2
#3	Suburban rural/Ningxiang	Senior secondary (Grade 10-12)	3000	3
#4	Suburban rural/ Ningxiang	Combined Elementary and Junior Secondary Grade 1-9)	2800	3
#5	Remote rural/ Jishou Town	Senior secondary (Grade 10-12)	1200	1
#6	Remote rural/Jishou town	Combined elementary, junior and senior secondary (Grade 1-12)	2000	3
#7	Remote rural/Jishou Town	Combined junior and senior secondary (Grade 7-12)	320	2

Changsha is the capital city of Hunan province. The city covers close to 12,000 square kilometers and the 2009 census indicates an estimated population of over 6 million people. Each urban school enrolls between 4000-5000 students annually, taught by about 300 teachers. The two suburban schools are located in Ningxiang, approximately 80 km from Changsha. Ningxiang has a population of 1,307,037 and is located on the west side of Changsha.

The number of students in these schools is about 3000, with about 200 teachers in each school. The three remote rural schools are located in Xiangxi autonomous prefecture division, in particular Jishou, the capital of the Xiangxi autonomous prefecture. Over 77% of the population are Miao or Tujia minorities in Jishou. Consequently, there is a higher percentage of minority students in these schools than the other four schools. It is important to note that all the rural schools, even those in remote rural regions, are located in rural towns rather than the countryside. See Table 2 for details.

Salary and Pension

Urban rural disparity is not a new phenomenon. Within a market economy, the Chinese educational system still possessed urban rural inequalities, for the same or different reasons. One of such urban rural gap, from the analysis of the data, was reflected in teachers' salary and pension.

Teachers' salary had increased since the change from a planned economy in the 1980's to the current market economy. During the planned economy, teacher salary could barely over basic needs such as food, much less buying their own home or luxury items such as cars. Under the market economy, many teachers, particularly those in urban schools, were able to save and buy their own homes and even cars.

Life for teachers has changed a lot. When I graduated in 1984, I earned 78 (\$12.2 CAD) which was considered rich because a typical new teacher, with a bachelor's degree, would earn around 50 yuan (\$7.8 CAD). Now I can earn more than 3000 yuan (\$468 CAD) per month. (W6, urban)

At first glance, the salary level between urban and rural teachers in this study is not significantly different, especially after factoring the cost of living index of these regions. However, "grey income", a term coined in China in 1978 describing gains beyond official salaries (and therefore non-taxable), is an important factor contributing to the differentiation between the teachers in urban and rural regions. In urban schools, all the teachers we interviewed had various venues to earn such grey income, ranging from tutoring students after schools, to receiving gifts or HongBao (red envelopes with money inside) from parents. They also had more chances, if they wished, to get part-time jobs to teach in other schools such as trade schools, and professional schools in their spare time. In fact, the grey income of these urban teachers, on average, is between 2000 yuan (\$312 CAD) and 5000 yuan (\$780 CAD) per month, sometimes even more. A few of these teachers admitted that their grey income was more important than their official salary. Rural teachers, on the other hand, had much fewer opportunities to earn extra income from sources other than their school salary.

During the planned economy era, teachers focused solely on their teaching without desiring extra money. In this province, many teachers want to teach in famous schools not only because it meant more job satisfaction, but also because they would earn more, especially if they teach extra courses. Also, there is an imbalance of teaching resources. (T7, rural)

While teacher income is one index, an important and direct one, reflecting the urban rural disparity, is teacher benefits such as pension. Teacher pension is a thorny problem for the government and public school systems. A retired *gongban* teacher is eligible to receive both pension and retirement salary. Pensions are provided by the provincial government while retirement salary is determined and supplied by the central government.

The analysis of the teacher interviews indicated that the urban teachers were offered pensions but not the rural teachers. In other words, rural schools in China often did not contribute to teachers' pension. However, even the teachers

in urban key schools had problems with their pensions, depending on the financial situation of their province. As well, it was relatively difficult for teachers to move from one school to another, even though the central government policies tried to promote “talent flow”. When a teacher wanted to move from their current school to another, it often was rejected. If s/he insisted, s/he needed to resign from his or her previous school, consequently losing all the pension (including the years of service) and benefits attached.

The core issues of a market economy are still not resolved. For instance, the Hunan Province doesn't have money to pay for our pensions. We can just get retirement salary and the amount is decided by the government. Now talent flow is not allowed unless in an unfriendly way. (O3, urban)

Workload

The urban rural disparity was also examined through the lens of teacher workload. Different schools had different rules with respect to fixed or flexible hours for teachers, regardless of the geographic locations of the schools. No matter one's location, all of the teachers had to work long hours. Homeroom teachers and teachers working in boarding schools had even longer working days. A typical urban teacher arrived at school around 7:30 am, with a 1-1.5 hour lunch period, and left about 6:30 pm. They were also responsible for evening tutorial classes two nights per week and some regular Saturday morning classes. Homeroom teachers would go to work earlier every day, arriving around 6:30 am to take care of students' self-study period in the evenings, as illustrated below:

I arrive at my office at about 7:30. Before 8 am, all the teachers have to decide their work schedule for the day. During class breaks, students often ask me questions. Besides, I have lesson preparation group meeting, material checking and work planning to do. The noon break is best for planning teaching because it is quiet but mostly I answer students' questions in my office. I finish class at 5:20 pm because the school ends at 6 pm. After that, students have a short self-learning period. I almost never leave my office before 6:30pm. Sometimes I have evening classes. I even have weekend classes because I teach senior 3 students. (L1, urban)

Rural schoolteachers typically started working at about 6:30 am and finished at 9:30 pm every weekday. They had about 1 to 2 hour break during lunch and dinnertime. Boarding school teachers, however, worked for three weeks straight and got the fourth weekend off. Again, homeroom teachers had to get to school at 6 am to supervise student physical exercises and self-study classes. They also had to provide supervision during lunch and dinner hours as well as evening self-learning periods.

I'm the teacher in charge of a class (i.e. homeroom teacher). Apart from teaching, I have to stay longer at school because there are some students who live in school. I arrive at school at 6 am to facilitate students' morning physical exercises. Then they have a self-

study time till 7 am. I have a break at noon in my office or dorm. The first class begins at 8 am and the school is over at 5 pm. Most students continue their study at school from 6:30 to 9 pm. Sometimes I stay with them but most of the time I stay in my office. I have to stay not only because the school regulations but also my own willingness. I go home at 9:30 pm every day. (Z11, rural)

In short, all teachers had long working days, regardless of where they were. Rural teachers had even longer working days than their urban counterparts. A regular urban teacher worked at least 9.5 hours per day, while a typical rural teacher's workday lasted 11 hours or more, not counting the evening and weekend classes. Homeroom teachers and teachers in boarding schools worked even longer hours and more days.

Living and Working Conditions

Teachers' living and working conditions had improved since the change from a planned economy to a market economy model. Comments from teachers, in both rural and urban schools, clearly demonstrated how much their living conditions had improved. Under the market economy, many teachers, particularly those work in urban schools, own their homes and some even have purchased more than one apartment, which would have been inconceivable during the pervious planned economy era, as exemplified by the following excerpts from participants' interviews:

It was hard to live comfortably during the planned economy age no matter in the city or rural areas. Besides, more roads have been built which are more convenient. And we have more provisions and can easily buy food outside the school gate. All these were impossible in the planned economy era. (L9, rural)

I can save some money after daily expenses every month. I can use what I saved to buy a car. Normally, a three-people family has a house and a car. Some of them even have 2 or 3 houses. (Y4, urban)

Improvements such as these, however, were not distributed evenly across the profession. For the remote- rural areas, living conditions were much worse. Although some teachers owned their home, many others had to live with their parents. Some schools provided rooms for teachers to stay overnight when needed, usually once or twice a week. The condition of these rooms was often not good. As described by one teacher, "The living condition is also simple and crude here in school. For instance, we have 3 teachers share a 10 square meter room." (Z14, rural)

Many young teachers lived in old apartment buildings provided by the schools. These building often lacked an adequate number of lavatories like this teacher described:

Our living condition has been improved and some teachers have moved in the “low-price houses” which are new buildings funded by the government. But most young teachers still live in old buildings. In summer, we have centipedes and other insects falling from the roof of the building. Besides, most buildings don’t have bathrooms or toilets, which is extremely inconvenient. (G18, remote rural)

Working conditions, especially in urban and suburban rural areas, have improved fundamentally when compared to twenty years ago. When we interviewed the participants, we found that urban schools, particularly the key schools, had good infrastructure and were well equipped with updated technology and other facilities. For example, each classroom in the key schools had a computer and a LCD projector so teachers could use it whenever needed. Their hardware and software were often up-to-date. Other urban schools or suburban rural schools generally had one or two computer labs per school, but the equipment and software were not as up-to-date. Teachers in urban and suburban rural schools had good working spaces, often with shared office rooms.

Remote rural schools, on the other hand, had substantially fewer resources, especially when compared with key urban schools. Remote rural schools either had no computers, or very few old computers with limited Internet services. As this teacher in a remote rural school described:

Our school is a remote school and more than 60 km from a township. It is the most remote school in this district. Working conditions are simple and crude. (Z16, rural)

Further, rural teachers, compared to urban teachers, had fewer professional development (PD) opportunities. The farther away a school was from an urban center, the less likely its teachers had PD opportunities, let alone high-quality PD programs. Urban teachers, particularly those in key schools, attended professional development programs offered by higher educational institutions more frequently than their rural counterparts. Many urban teachers had chances to take advanced professional development courses organized and taught by experts in the field from top-tier universities. Rural teachers, in contrast, could only attend professional programs offered at the local level and rarely had a chance to hear from experts in the field.

The analysis of the data demonstrated that, consequently, urban teachers, compared to their rural counterparts, had a deeper understanding about the profound meaning of the new curriculum and accompanying pedagogy. Many urban teachers interviewed had articulated the shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred approaches in the new curriculum and were able to give specific examples, while none of the rural teachers discussed this, even with appropriate prompts.

Limited opportunities meant that not every rural teacher could advance themselves through professional development programs. The policy was that good teachers were often sent for advanced learning opportunities. Some rural teachers questioned the logic of such policy that enlarged, instead of narrowed, the gap between good and poor teachers, as exemplified by this comment:

In this market economy, there is a policy that supports the strong and ignores the weak. Take training, especially good ones, as an example: competent teachers get more chances for professional development. But it's illogical because not-so-good teachers should be trained instead of good ones. (X12, rural)

Another significant urban-rural difference is related to the diversity of student populations. Although both urban and rural schools had problems with limited resources, this problem was much more acute in rural schools. One of the approaches schools used to solve the problem was to increase student enrollment to collect various fees. Students with different academic preparation, therefore, could be placed in one classroom. Although there were policies in place to limit such increased enrollment, many schools, particularly rural schools, still had over extended enrolment. These extended enrolment programs led to large size classes, often with 50 to 60 students per class. Students in such extended enrollment programs in rural schools were usually lower achievers compared to their urban counterparts who were not enrolled in such programs.

In rural school like ours, students have different levels. Plus the extended enrolment of secondary schools, some students have almost no school learning experience before. How to teach those students? We have the academic level test in senior 2, those students will add huge burden on teachers. (Z15, rural)

At first glance, teachers' living and working conditions seemed to have improved significantly, particularly for those in urban schools and those in suburban rural schools in close proximity to a big city. Yet, when we look deeper, our conclusions change.

Firstly, though the earnings of both urban and rural teachers appeared initially to be similar, as both sets of teachers drew a similar government salary, the urban teachers were able to earn money outside their official salary. This "gray income", in some cases, was an even more significant portion of teachers' total income than their government-paid salary. In addition to salary and other income differences, rural teachers tended to have much fewer benefits than urban teachers. Although pension remained a difficult issue for urban teachers, rural teachers did not even have that option; pension was not even provided for them. The data from this case study suggest that the improvement for most is in material conditions of life.

Secondly, although compared to Canadian teachers, Chinese teachers worked longer hours, there was still a significant disparity between the workload of Chinese urban and rural teachers. Rural teachers worked much longer hours per day than their urban counterparts.

Considering that the participating teachers in this study were all public school teachers, it is fair to conclude that working and living conditions seemed to have worsened in remote-rural regions, indicating an enlarged urban-rural disparity.

Discussion and Conclusion

This article examined changes in urban-rural discrepancies in education under China's market economy, with a focus on the teaching and living conditions of teachers in both rural and urban schools. China has gradually shifted from a centrally planned economy to one of a socialist-market economy, transforming the educational systems in China. The study reveals that recent changes in education have had a tremendous impact on teachers in many different ways, including their workload, remuneration, wellbeing, and teaching and living conditions.

The most disturbing issue identified in this study is the persistent, potentially even larger, gap between urban and rural schools. Such gap is reflected in teachers' living and working conditions including teacher salary, benefits, pension, available teaching resources, school environment, and opportunities for advanced studies. Although teachers' teaching and living conditions have improved, mostly reflected in their material life, the gaps between urban and rural regions are still significant. Results from this study demonstrate that schools in rural areas have significantly less funding and opportunities than their urban counterparts. Consequently, teachers in these areas are paid less, live in poor housing conditions, and have heavier workloads. This is consistent with previous research that rural teachers, compared to their urban counterparts, have significantly fewer resources, worse living and working conditions (Wang & Li, 2009). As well, this study demonstrates that rural teachers have fewer high quality professional development opportunities with external resources.

An urban and rural inequality relates to the 'brain-drain' of teachers (Niu, 2009). That is, highly qualified teachers tend to move to urban, high paid schools. In the present study, a brain-drain phenomenon is also identified, but of students. The exam-driven educational system in China has resulted in a brain-drain of students; high-achieving students in rural regions, particularly at senior high levels, are lured to urban schools, particularly to key schools.

The large disparity between the rural and urban area, as reflected in teachers' working and living conditions, evokes a critical debate related to equity. This indicates an urgent need to give more priority to the rural and remote areas and calls for holistic approaches to address the issues. The government, at local, provincial, and central level should adopt specific administrative measures such as social-welfare reform and increased investment, paying particular attention to educational systems in rural regions.

References

- Bao, C. (2006). Policies for compulsory education disparity between urban and rural areas in China. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 1(1), 40-55.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (1990). Grounded theory research: Procedures, canons, and evaluative criteria. *Qualitative Sociology*, 13, 3-21.
- Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design; Choosing Among Five Traditions*. London: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. (2012). *Educational Research: Planning, Conducting, and Evaluating Quantitative and Qualitative Research*. New York: Pearson.
- Gao, F., & Yuan, J. (1995). Mental health survey of primary school teachers in Shanghai. *Shanghai Research on Education*, 3, 40-45.
- Gregory, P., & Stuart, R. (2004). *Market economy: Economy in which fundamentals of supply and demand provide signals regarding resource utilization* (7 ed.). Mason, OH: South-Western.
- Hunan. (n.d.). Hunan, Wikipedia Retrieved May 27, 2011, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hunan>
- Hunan Provincial Department of Education. (2007). *International Exchange and Cooperation of Education in Hunan Province*. Changsha: Retrieved from <http://www.hunanteach.org/>.
- Knight, J., & Shi, L. (1996). Educational attainment and the rural urban divide in China. *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and statistics*, 58(1), 83-117.
- Lewin, K., & Xu, H. (1989). Rethinking revolution: Reflections on China's 1985 educational reforms. *Comparative Education*, 125(1), 7-17.
- Liao, Q., & Li, H. (2004). The status quo of the teachers' mental health in primary and junior high schools and its harms: The overall narration about the teachers' mental problem in recent years. *Academic Exploration* 4, 56-59.
- Miles, M., & Huberman, A. (1994). *An expanded sourcebook: Qualitative data analysis* (2 ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA.: Sage Publications.
- Niu, Z. (2009). Reforms on teachers' employment system and children's rights to education in China. *International Journal of Educational Management*, 23(1), 7-18.
- Tan, S. (2003). Status quo, difficulties and countermeasures of the development of rural education in China. *Peking University Education Review*, 1, 99-103.
- Wang, D. (2003). China's rural compulsory education: Current situation, problems and policy alternatives. Beijing: Institute of Population and Labor Economics, Chinese Academy of Social Sciences.
- Wang, J., & Li, Y. (2009). Research on the Teaching Quality of Compulsory Education in China's West Rural Schools *Frontiers of Education in China*, 4(1), 66-93.

- Wu, C. (2007). The Study on the Evolvement and Determinants of Urban Rural Fiscal Expenditure Gap of Compulsory Education in China. *Education Science*, 23(6), 1-5.
- Yang, D. (2006). *The ideal vs. the reality of equality of education in China*. Beijing: Beijing University Press.
- Zhang, J., & Lu, A. (2008). Review of Teachers' Mental Health Research in China since 1994. *Frontiers of Education in China*, 3(4), 623-638.

Dr. Qing Li is a professor at the Department of Educational Technology and Literacy in Towson University, USA. She has published widely, including over 55 refereed journal articles. Her latest co-edited book, *Cyberbullying in the Global Playground: Research from International Perspectives*, was published by Wiley-Blackwell in 2012.