One Country, Diverse Systems: Politics of Educational Decentralization and Challenges for the Regulatory State in Post-Mao China

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Abstract

The economic transition in China since the late 1970s has led not only to drastic social transformations but also rapid advancements in science and technology, as well as a revolution in information and communications technology. In order to enhance the global competence of the Chinese population in coping with the challenges of the knowledge-based economy, the higher education sector has been going through restructuring along the lines of marketization, privatization and decentralization. Responding to the challenges of globalization, the Chinese government has opened up the education market by allowing private/minban higher education institutions and even overseas...
universities to offer academic programmes in the mainland. Hence, we have witnessed a proliferation of education providers, a diversification of education financing, and an increase in private-public partnerships in education provision since the policy of educational decentralization was introduced in the mid-1980s. This article sets out to examine the politics of educational decentralization in this wider policy context by critically analysing the tensions between the central education ministry, conventional *minban* higher education institutions and the newly emerging state-endorsed independent *minban* colleges (second-tier colleges or independent colleges). It also reflects critically upon the policy implications for the evolving “governed market” in education, and analyses the challenges for the new regulatory regime now that the higher education sector has become highly diversified in post-Mao China.¹

**The Challenges of Globalization to State Capacity: The Search for New Governance²**

Before the end of the Cold War, nation states were “perceived as the primary political communities with the capacity to determine the status and to make rules for any activity that fell within contemporary understandings of the scope of legitimate authority. States were sovereign and hence each state determined within itself the nature of its internal and external policies.”³ The revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe and their aftermath have led to growing concerns about the declining capacity of modern states in governance and rising scepticism, especially doubting the ability of the state in managing the challenges of globalization. Many observers believe that capital is becoming more mobile and has no national attachments; national politics and political choices are considered to have been sidelined by global market forces; and transnational corporations are perceived as the key players in defining not only economic but also social and political agendas. It is in this broader political and economic context that people have begun to find national-level governance ineffective in coping with challenges generated from globalizing economic and social processes.⁴ As Susan Strange puts it, “where states were once the masters of markets, now it is the markets which, on many crucial issues, are master over the Governments of states.”⁵

Such views are supported by hyper-globalists such as Ohmae and Reich, who go so far as to believe that nation states have become the