

An Introduction of the Special Issue on the Economics of Education in China

Mun C. Tsang

Teachers College, Columbia University

Ji Liu

Teachers College, Columbia University

The history of Teachers College's involvement with China and Chinese education dates back to its early founding years in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Over the past century, many TC faculty and students have been engaged in shaping education policy and research in modern China. John Dewey and Paul Monroe led a long-held tradition of faculty interest in teaching and conducting research about China. Samuel Sung Young (M.A., 1905') and Kuo Ping Wen (Ph.D., 1914'), the first master's and doctoral TC graduates from China, set examples for later generations to advance the modern Chinese education system (see Zhou, 2001; Allen and Liu, 2016). At the turn of the 21st century, TC established the Center on Chinese Education, which has become an active hub for hosting academic dialogues on education issues in China and an important advocate for educational exchange between the United States and China. Given this unique institutional history and broader scholarly interest on China and Chinese education, Current Issues in Comparative Education is delighted to collaborate with the Center on Chinese Education to publish this special-themed issue. With this opportunity, the CICE Editorial Board hopes to honor and celebrate the historically strong connection between TC and China, and also introduce timely economics of education research to the larger comparative and international education research community.

This special issue of Current Issues in Comparative Education marks the first occasion in this journal's 20-year history that we present a collection of new research that focuses on timely education topics in China and employs an economics of education perspective. Economics of education is an interdisciplinary field of study that is concerned with the economic dimensions of education and with using economic theories and methods in the study of education problems and policies. The early development of economics of education in China can be traced to a major shift in perspectives about the role of education in national development in the post-1978 reform and opening-up period.

Education is not only seen to have a key role in shaping ideology and as an arena of political contestation; it is also a key input to economic production. Spending on education is not only consumption but also an investment with economic returns such as increased productivity and higher output. In the early 1980s, Chinese scholars began exploring the economic role of education in national development under socialist principles. At the same time, they were also eager to understand western perspectives in economics of education, such as human capital theory, education signaling, and labor-market segmentation. As China moved into the development of a socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics in a global context since the 1990s, economics of education has matured as a recognized field of study in China. The intellectual and analytical gaps between the west and China in this field have also narrowed considerably. Today, economics of education in China is a vibrant field of study with many competent scholars, high-quality academic programs and research centers, and well established professional organizations and journals. Along with increasing funding and the development of an infrastructure in support of research in general, research in economics of education is a significant contributor to informed analysis and policymaking in education in China.

The seven authors/first co-authors of the seven articles in this special issue are all doctoral graduates of the Economics and Education Program at Teachers College Columbia University and they are all from China. This program is not only endowed with faculty with both U.S. and international expertise in various areas of economics of education, it is also affiliated with several research centers that provide intellectual and financial support to students, such as the Center on Chinese Education, the Center for Benefit-Cost Studies in Education, the National Center for the Study of Privatization in Education, and the Community College Research Center. The program is one of the largest degree programs in Teachers College in terms of Chinese-students enrollment. The majority of students in this program are international students and Chinese students constitute the largest geographical group among international students. The study of economics of Chinese education at Teachers College is strengthened by the strong interest of the faculty in China, the support of the affiliated research centers, the academic relationship between Teachers College and universities in China, and the historical relationship between Teachers College and modern Chinese education. Most of the Chinese doctoral graduates of the program have returned to work in China after graduation and are mostly engaged in teaching and research in the university. They are active members of the scholarly community of economics of education in China; they are also bridges between U.S. and Chinese education.

The seven studies provide a good representation of the variety and characteristics of the research on economics of Chinese education undertaken by the Chinese graduates of the Economics and Education Program at Teachers College. They are predominately quantitative empirical studies guided by some theoretical framework in economics of education. They cover research on different levels of education in China, including early childhood education, basic education, and higher education. They encompass analyses in different areas within the field of economics of education, such as the economic benefits of education, education costs and financing, education production process, education and labor-market, and economic factors in educational decision-making. Data used in the analyses come from two main sources: data collected from a single city or region by the researchers themselves, and data for secondary analysis from periodic national surveys. The following is a brief summary of each of the seven studies.

Following an education production function framework, **Yu Zhang and Xuehan Zhou** explore the influence of household educational expenditure on student achievement on the national college entrance examination. The authors take advantage of the detailed consumption information collected from a household survey administered in Shandong Province, and find evidence for heterogeneous effects of household education spending across the achievement distribution. While household educational expenditure, on average, does not seem to have a statistically significant impact on student scores on the national college entrance examination, quantile regression results show household education spending can have positive, significant impacts at the high end of the ability distribution. The authors interpret this finding in the context of school fees and private tutoring, and argue that such spending are often inefficient inputs in education production.

Haogen Yao presents an impact evaluation of a 1-month-long intensive socio-emotional support intervention program, “Lighthouse,” that was implemented in rural Guangdong Province, to boost lower secondary students’ post-compulsory education decisions (PCED). Using an original survey, Yao utilizes propensity score matching to assess the treatment effect on program participants. The results indicate that although there are many potential channels through which socio-emotional support may affect PCED, the main effect of “Lighthouse” occurs through elevating participant educational aspirations. The author also discusses findings from interviewing program implementers, participants and their family, and patterns from analyzing participant program records.

Given the broader policy context of promoting entrepreneurship education, **You You, Feifei Zhu, and Xiaohao Ding** seek to understand institutional factors influencing

entrepreneurship development in Chinese universities. The authors use data from a nationwide institutional survey on directors of career services at various colleges and universities, and find that while college students in China demonstrate a high level of interest in entrepreneurship, actual participation rates are low. In addition, directors of career services at highly-selective universities are more likely to report favorably on institutional policies and practices that provide guidance and support for entrepreneurship.

Xin Gong and Pengcheng Wang review how preservice teachers are trained in different contexts by comparing pre-primary teacher education systems in China and the United States. The authors discuss the within-country teacher qualification variations in terms of entry and certification requirements, and identify examples of different program features that are common across contexts. Throughout the study, the authors juxtapose the teacher preparation system in China and the United States. Findings indicate that while each system has its unique challenges, they offer useful policy insights, such as the emphasis of practicum in the early childhood teacher education programs in the United States and the unified teacher certification standards in China.

Connecting to the global student mobility literature, **Jing Li, Fei Guo, and You You** utilize data from two national surveys, the Chinese College Student Survey (CCSS) in China and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States, and employ propensity score matching to identify the underlying relationship between individual's decision to study abroad and college academic performance. The authors first compare access to study abroad programs, and find that in the United States, ethnicity, gender, and program discipline are more influential determinants of study abroad participation. Whereas in China, the participation rates differ between students from urban and rural areas. Finally, propensity score matching results suggest that studying abroad positively impacts academic performance in both the American and Chinese samples.

Fei Guo investigates the incidence of engagement in part-time work during academic terms (term-time working) among college students in China. Guo's study utilizes data from the 2011 wave of College Students Labor Market (CSLM) survey. Results indicate that term-time working is prevalent among Chinese college students; while they are relatively short in duration, many term-time working are intense in terms of workload, and participation is mainly determined by soft-skills, financial need, and number of peers who work.

Situated in the debate on rapid tertiary education development, **Li Yu** estimates the impact of college quality on early labor market outcomes in China and discusses the implications of social stratification through tertiary education. Yu's study utilizes propensity score matching based on data from the 2011 wave of College Students Labor Market (CSLM) survey, and finds that students who attend highly-selective institutions (such as "985 Project" and "211 Project" universities) are more likely to experience smoother transition to the labor market, such as finding employment immediately after degree completion and entering the public sector.

Finally, this special issue of CICE cannot be made possible without the dedication of our reviewers, editors, and contributing authors. We hope this special issue on Economics of Education in China will not only contribute to the long-held tradition of TC's engagement with Chinese education, but also create a productive space for comparative education researchers to discuss emerging topics related to the economics of education

About the Special Issue co-Editors

Mun C. Tsang has been Professor of Economics and Education at Teachers College, Columbia University since 1998, the founding director of the Center on Chinese Education since 2000, and Changjiang Professor of Economics of Education at Peking University since 2006.

Ji Liu is a PhD candidate and Doctoral Fellow in International Comparative Education and Economics at Teachers College, Columbia University, and Chief Editor for Current Issues in Comparative Education.

Contact: Mun C. Tsang at mct27@tc.columbia.edu, Ji Liu at jl4103@tc.columbia.edu; for CICE business please contact cice@tc.columbia.edu.

References

- Zhou, H. (2001). *A College and a Country -Teachers College, Columbia University and Modern Chinese Education*. New York: Center on Chinese Education, Teachers College. Link: <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/coce/about-us/feature-article-teachers-college-and-chinese-education/>
- Allen, R. & Liu, J., (2016). *Kuo Ping Wen: Scholar, Statesman, and Reformer*. San Francisco: Long River Press.