ELITE EDUCATION

International perspectives

Edited by Claire Maxwell and Peter Aggleton
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Introduction

The notion of elite, commonly taken to correspond with the Chinese term jingying, has complex connotations and a long trajectory unique to the Chinese socio-historical context. Arguably, the most well-known fact about pre-modern China with respect to education is that, since the Sui Dynasty (AD 581–618), an imperial examination system (known as the keju system) has existed for the purpose of selecting civil servants. For almost the entire second millennium, that is, until the system’s demise in 1905, the keju examination in its mature form formed the backbone of the imperial governing structure in China, whereby a class of Confucian scholarly elites, more or less meritocratically selected through the examination, received the mandate to run the imperial bureaucratic machine and to wield sociocultural and political power. Notwithstanding the fact that the keju is now commonly seen as indoctrination, scholars have argued that the system provided social mobility on meritocratic principles (e.g. Ho 1964) and this meritocratic ideal continues to powerfully influence contemporary Chinese people’s understandings of, and attitudes towards, issues around education, elitism and social mobility (Kipnis 2011).

Throughout the twentieth century, particularly during its latter half, elitism in education – both in meaning and in practice – faced fierce contestation and underwent tumultuous swings. With the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, the country’s Communist leaders launched the project of constructing a socialist modernity, in which the education system was charged with the important task of producing the technocratic and scientific elites. To this end, in the early years of the PRC and prior to the 1966 Cultural Revolution, the education system was characterised by an academically selective and elitist approach, using streaming, specialisation and hierarchisation to achieve the goal of producing talent as quickly as possible. To Mao and other
radical left leaders, however, such elitist educational practices contravened the socialist ideal; and this was one of the reasons why they initiated the wide-ranging and devastating Cultural Revolution. The main implication of this change of policy for the education system was the enforcement of a radically egalitarian approach, dramatically expanding enrollment rates at the cost of academic quality and selectivity (Unger 1982). After the demise of Mao and radical socialism in the late 1970s, China entered an era of reform, and education policies were swiftly changed, reinstating many of the pre-Cultural Revolution institutions and practices (Pepper 1980, Thesigren 1990).

More than three decades have now passed since China first embarked on its post-Socialist reform, and it is worth asking what ‘eliteness’ or ‘elitism’ have come to mean in the contemporary Chinese education system. This chapter offers a preliminary exploration of this question, drawing on findings from an ethnographic study. Although elite education in many countries is primarily associated with private/independent schooling, and researchers in this emerging field seem thus far to have focused mainly on this type of institution, in the Chinese context, the most relevant meanings and practices of educational elitism are to be found in relation to the institution of public/state schooling. Private elite education in some form no doubt exists in China, but this appears to be a recent development that still remains marginal in terms of scholarly research, and so is worthy of future study. The second caveat for this chapter is that, instead of providing a schematic overview, my approach offers a series of ethnographic vignettes as a somewhat fragmented lens through which to obtain some provisional glimpses into the meanings of eliteness in the Chinese education system today.

The chapter is organised as follows: first, I briefly describe the ethnographic fieldwork underpinning this chapter and the field site school; then I proceed to two ethnographic sections in which I elaborate on what I regard to be two of the most relevant meanings of eliteness in the Chinese state schooling system, which appear to be in tension with one another; finally, I close the chapter with some reflections on the notion of elite as it relates to my own personal biography and educational trajectory.

**Ethnographic context**

The fieldwork underpinning this chapter was carried out in China between April and June 2011, during which time I returned as a doctoral student of the anthropology of education to the very school (School A) that I had graduated from ten years before. This three-month field trip formed the first stage of a 16-month period of dual-sited fieldwork, the second part of which I spent in Singapore (see Yang 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Although it was a relatively brief stint, having been myself a ‘product’ of the Chinese school system and as an ‘old boy’ of School A, my intimate and ‘sensuous’ (Willis 2000) knowledge of the field site certainly expedited the ‘finding-one’s-way’ stage of an ethnographer’s typical entry into an unfamiliar territory, allowing me to plunge into the deep end of ethnographic data gathering much sooner than anticipated.

School A is located in Nanchang, the capital city of the southeastern inland province Jiangxi. With a per capita gross domestic product (GDP) that ranked twenty-seventh out of a total 34 administrative regions in China as of 2010, Jiangxi is one of the lesser developed and hence perhaps less heard-of Chinese places to an international audience. Nevertheless, the city of Nanchang itself, being the provincial seat of government, more or less exemplifies the typical, average Chinese urban milieu. School A is a public middle school affiliated to Jiangxi Province’s Teachers College, and has long been regarded as one of the most academically successful schools in the entire province. As such, School A may be confidently viewed as representative of the ‘normal’ and normative conditions in which Chinese middle school education is delivered.

School A comprises a junior middle (chuzhong) section (grades 7–9, age 13–15 years) and a senior middle (gaozhong) section (grades 10–12, age 16–18 years). As of 2009, there were 71 home classes across these six grades, in which over 4,100 students were educated and supported by over 300 teaching and administrative staff members. As a school reputed for its academic excellence (measured in terms of its success in sending students to high-ranking, prestigious universities), School A usually manages to draw the most academically able students from Nanchang city and a small number of top students from across Jiangxi Province. In the 2010 national university entrance exam (U&E), 22 students from the school gained admission to Tsinghua or Peking University – the two most prestigious and competitive universities in China that are often seen as belonging to a league of their own, much like Britain’s Oxbridge. This number must be interpreted against the background fact that China’s socialist planning legacies in the education system dictate that top national universities have only very limited admission quotas for the provinces. For example, in 2009, Peking and Tsinghua Universities had a combined admission quota of just 66 in Jiangxi; this quota being slightly higher at 84 in the year 2012. This means that the senior middle section of School A manages to turn out between one-quarter and one-third of all Peking/Tsinghua-admitted students in a province of 45 million people where 438 senior middle schools prepare some 251,060 students for higher education admission overall.

I gained research access to School A thanks to the help of the school’s Deputy Headmaster who had been my teacher when I was a tenth grader. During the three months I spent at School A, I was made an ‘assistant teacher’ to a grade 10 class, supporting the teachers in their work. In addition, I sat in and listened to lessons in all subjects as much as I could. After becoming acquainted with the students, I also had plenty of opportunity to interact with them in both formal and informal settings, such as over lunch or dinner in the canteen or occasionally helping them practise conversational English.

During my three-month stint in Nanchang, I also visited two other schools to gain comparative insights: ‘School B’ and ‘School C’. School B is another top school in the city and the province, and has long been the arch-rival of School A. School C, on the other hand, usually ranks close to the bottom among middle schools in Nanchang based on exam benchmarking. My visits to these two schools
gave me a better sense of perspective, but for ethnographic purposes, School A should be considered my sole fieldwork site.

Forging academic elites within the system: hierarchy and meritocracy

In this section, I elaborate using ethnographic material a possible first meaning of eliteness within the Chinese context, namely in the form of academic elitism, ruthless meritocratic selectivity, exclusivity and competitiveness geared towards forging the elites who are, in turn, supposed to champion the modernist nation-building project.

Systems and nomenclature

Consider first the following list of institutions and practices that characterise the Chinese middle school system (this is by no means an exhaustive list, most terms are generic and used widely throughout China, while a few others are part of a local ‘lingo’):

- ‘High exam’ (gaokao): the university entrance exam (UEE) that takes place over the course of two or three days in June each year across the entire country for grade 12 graduates. In principle, provinces administer the high exam for the students under their jurisdiction, using different but comparable examination papers. Examinees are ranked within their province based on their scores and, in turn, this ranking determines whether they are to be admitted to the universities countrywide that they have chosen to apply to for entrance. As a legacy of the socialist command system, universities have pre-set quotas for each province, usually favouring the region in which the university is located. To most students and parents, the gaokao is considered very much the ultimate purpose of attending senior middle school.

- ‘Key’ versus ‘ordinary’ universities and ‘first-/second-/third-tier universities’: higher education institutions in China can be broadly divided into ‘key universities’ (zhongdian gaocai) and ‘ordinary universities’ (putong gaocai), whereby the key institutions receive more investment from the state. Another categorisation is the tiering system, which dictates the order in which institutions are to process student applications after the high exam takes place: ‘first-tier’ (yiben) universities admit students who have applied to them before the second-tier (erben) universities can do the same, and so on. This tiering system is supposed to ensure the rational outcome that the universities get the students they deserve and vice versa. Thus, the tiering is also an important indicator of the universities’ perceived and real academic quality and prestige.

- ‘Middle exam’ (zhongkao) or the ‘entrance exam for senior middle school’: the city-/county-level examination that students take upon completing junior middle school (grade 7–9). It operates on a logic very similar to that of the high exam.

- ‘Key school’ (zhongdian), ‘key school under construction’ (jianguo zhongdian) and ‘ordinary school’ (putong): three categories of senior middle schools at city/county level, determined by the provincial educational authority, that reflect in descending order their perceived or real quality, importance and prestige.

- ‘Key class’ (zhongdian ban): in any given senior middle school, a small number of classes in a grade cohort – usually no more than two – are designated ‘key classes’, which gather together the ‘best’ students in the cohort, based on their termly or monthly exam score rankings. Students in key classes are given more attention by the school and by the teachers. Variations of the concept of ‘key class’ include, for example, the ‘zero class’ (ling ban), a term which offers a declaration of the class’s superiority, because classes are normally numbered starting from One; the self-explanatory ‘excellence-cultivation class’ (gejiuzou ban); the ‘experimental class’ (shiyan ban), which experiments with more challenging content and faster teaching paces; and, interestingly, the ‘golden-poster class’ (jinhaiban), whose name takes its inspiration from the imperial mandarin examination in olden times whereby distinguished examinees’ names were displayed on a yellow poster for public admittance.

- ‘Ordinary class’ (putong ban): the majority of classes in a grade cohort that are not designated ‘key’. In recent years, there has been a tendency for this derogatory sounding term to be replaced by more palatable descriptors, such as ‘parallel class’ (pinghang ban).

- ‘Monthly exam’ (yuexia): in most Chinese senior middle schools, students sit monthly drill exams modelled on the high exam, testing all high exam-relevant subjects. After each monthly exam, students are ranked within the cohort based on their total scores. Normally, according to their new rankings, students may receive the honourable invitation to enter a ‘key class’ or face the dishonourable consequence of dropping out of the ‘key classes’ back to an ‘ordinary class’.

Elitism through pyramidal stratification

Above, I have chosen to present some of the key (infra)structural elements of the Chinese middle school system in order to highlight its most salient feature, namely, its steep hierarchisation through a mechanism that is meant to sort out the academic elites from the mediocre. Ranking, tiering and differentiation saturate the system, constituting the key principle around which both institutional relationships and human subjectivities are configured in the life-worlds of Chinese middle school students, teachers and parents. This hierarchisation takes on a more or less pyramidal shape: thus, there will always be fewer key schools than non-key schools, fewer first-tier universities than second-tier universities, and so forth.

True to the principle of exemplarity which Bakken (2000) sees as a key cultural logic to Chinese politics and society, there is a tendency for institutional setups and practices at the higher levels to be replicated at lower levels of the hierarchy as well. For instance, in recent years in Jiangxi Province – as is very likely also to be the
case elsewhere in China – the middle exam has become increasingly isomorphic with the high exam, whereby the three types of senior middle schools (key, key under construction and ordinary) correspond to the three tiers of universities (see also Wu 2014). The three types of exams, i.e. monthly, middle and high, resemble each other not just in format, but also in the effects these have of initiating processes of ranking, differentiation and hierarchisation. In fact, such replication can be seen further down the hierarchy, whereby junior middle school admission and even primary school admission in many places has now become competitive despite regulations explicitly prohibiting such practices.¹

This steeply hierarchical system encourages circles of self-reinforcing stratification. As students who have done well in the middle exam flock to key senior middle schools such as School A, these key schools easily garner academically capable students who are likely to bring honour to their schools in three years’ time in the high exam by scoring highly, which will further strengthen the schools’ reputation. Hence, talents become pyramidally stratified within the system, with the most academically capable students in a city or across an entire province often concentrated in only a handful of schools.

During my fieldwork, a School A official proudly told me two facts: among their 2009 intake of freshmen they had 88 of the top 100 students in that year’s Nanchang middle exam; for their 2010 intake, the entirety of Nanchang’s top 100 students came to School A. Yet, in spite of such success, School A was starting to spread its net out to the whole Jiangxi Province to recruit the best students from local districts. According to the students that I spoke to who had come up from the local districts to attend School A, teams of School A teachers would travel down to their local middle schools to administer tests and interviews, selecting the best ‘crops’ of new recruits. Technically, for School A to recruit students from outside Nanchang city constitutes a regulatory violation. However, the school has always enjoyed a good working relationship with the provincial educational authorities, and this regulatory inconveniences was elegantly dealt with by ensuring that School A became designated as a ‘provincial level key school’ (shengji zhongjian xueiao).

Such stratification and the concentration of ‘good’ students in one or two key schools has the consequence of leaving many other less ‘good’ schools severely de-motivated. During my first visit to School C, a manager there revealed that in 2010 only ten students out of a graduating cohort of almost 300 at the school made it into some form of tertiary education, none of which were regarded as ‘good’ (all third-tier institutions or technical colleges). Furthermore, upon learning that I was also doing fieldwork at School A, the School C manager lamented in metaphorical terms: ‘In the past, we used to get small fish and shrimp, while key schools like School A got the big fish; now the key schools trawl away the big fish, the small fish and the good shrimps, so we are only left with the very small shrimps! However capable we are as teachers we can’t help shrimps grow into fish – schools like ours are just hopeless’!

Students in Chinese middle schools are made painfully aware of their own place in this elitist hierarchy founded on the logic of academic distinction, which not only assigns symbolic privileges but also distributes real worldly rewards and punishments. For example, in Nanchang at the time of my fieldwork, the annual tuition fee for senior middle school was usually no more than 3,000 yuan (equivalent to about £600), but if a student failed to achieve the requirements and wished, nonetheless, to enter the school, ten times as much in ‘school choice fees’ (zhaoxiao fei) had to be paid to the school upfront in cash (see also Wu 2014). (Such a practice is not regarded as illegal or a form of bribery because a school normally can only admit a small number of such ‘choice students’, and the number is approved by the educational authorities; this practice is better understood as a measure of school autonomy under an otherwise highly regulated system, and the school sees ‘choice students’ as a source of extra funding.) At the same time, key schools in Nanchang and across China offer fee waivers to promising students who are spotted as possible ‘seeds’ for the high exam in three years’ time. Although not practised by any Nanchang schools to my knowledge, commentators have noted that practices such as dishing out cash prizes worth as much as 200,000 yuan (approximately £20,000) to students who make it into Tsinghua/Peking Universities do occur in some parts of China.

Meritocracy and the legitimization of academic elitism

Although to some, the steeply hierarchical nature of the Chinese schooling system may seem to border on oppression, at School A, I often sensed among students an optimism and determination that spoke of their accommodation of, if not quite complete identification with, this ruthless elitist system.

During the many canteen lunches and dinners I shared with School A students, I often tried to work out their attitudes towards this gigantic schooling infrastructure that closes in on them and intimately shapes their subjectivities. It seemed many students did not want to dwell on such a serious topic, preferring to talk about more lighthearted matters with me; however, when they sensed my persistence in hearing their opinions, they opened up and offered some thoughts. Many seemed genuinely to believe in the meritocracy of the Chinese education system and approved of the academic elitism with which it is synonymous. ‘Of course the system is not flawless – far from it – but can you tell me a fairer system that is possible in China’s current situation?’ one thoughtful grade 10 boy rhetorically questioned me. ‘The Chinese educational system is such that as long as you put in hard effort, you can get results and succeed’, echoed another. But the statement that left the deepest impression on me came from a grade 10 girl, who actually said: ‘In our system, even a genius has to bow in front of the diligent (tiansai zai gifen minyanqian ye yao dianl)!’

The fact that the hierarchies in the school and the resultant distribution of superiority–inferiority-markers, honour and shame, etc., are all based largely on students’ exam performances means that there is an ethos of fairness and just desert in School A. Another fierce-sounding statement that came from a student informant caught my ear: ‘In school, one speaks with a volume proportional to one’s exam results (zai xuexiao yong changji shuo hua)’! Discrimination or prejudice among
students based on their families' socioeconomic backgrounds was absent so far as I could tell, and this was so notwithstanding the actual disparities between their backgrounds that I managed to gauge through interacting with them. In the school, students wear tracksuit-style uniforms at all times, follow the same daily routines, do the same thing - everything revolves around study. Those hailing from outside the provincial capital city even receive preferential treatment - negotiated with the local municipal authorities on their behalf by School A officials - to have their household registration relocated to Nanchang for the duration of their studies so that they can eventually take their high exam there.

While limited space prevents a detailed discussion of this point, students' perception of meritocracy and relative fairness has to do with the systemic features of the Chinese middle school system. As anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2001) has argued, the ways in which contemporary Chinese school pedagogy emphasises methodic, rote memorisation and other un-'creative' forms of learning (see also Woronov 2008) - reasons for which the education system is often severely criticised both within and outside China - actually ends up building some meritocracy into the system by reducing the disadvantages suffered by students from rural and/or lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

To sum up, I contend that the logic of meritocratic academic elitism in China's schooling system operates by affording symbolic as well as material privileges to that select stratum of students who, by virtue of their sheer brilliance and conscientiousness, reach the top, whereas the rest who are 'mediocre' are relegated to lesser symbolic positions and are confronted with extra costs in material terms. This system does not shy away from the act of selecting and grooming a minority of the academic elite who will in future enter top universities and assume important roles in society; indeed, these are the system's organising principles. Academic elitism thus comprises not only the ensemble of minute practices, 'tactics' (cf. Boudon 1977) and infrastructural layouts that are found in the system as I have described, it also becomes a mentality, a cultural practice and, in short, an ideology that to a greater or lesser extent shapes human subjectivities within the educational system. At the same time, this elitism is thought to be meritocratic, because access to that elite status is asserted to be open by the school and teachers, and is therefore believed to be so by many students and their parents as well.

This form of meritocratic academic elitism has been the dominant logic in the mainstream Chinese schooling system since the 1980s. However, it is starting to face a rather uncertain future, as post-reform Chinese society becomes increasingly affluent, more deeply stratified and more globally connected. Elite schooling in the sense that the term is commonly understood in the West (e.g. Howard 2008, Gaztambide-Fernández 2009, Maxwell and Aggleton 2010, 2013, Khan 2011) has not only made an appearance in China - although I do not look into the development of private elite schooling in China in this chapter - but seems to be infiltrating even the public schooling system in interesting ways that have been little explored so far. It is to this latter incursion of economically based elitism into the public middle school system in China that I now turn.

Re-routing the future socioeconomic elites: internationalisation and privilege

In 2011, when I returned to School A to carry out fieldwork, the Deputy Head of the school was an excited and busy man: he and his team were in the midst of juggling between negotiations with an American high school about setting up an International Programme at School A (a 'Sino-American Programme' or zhusheyue ban) on the one hand, and dealing with the provincial educational authorities to obtain official approval for this programme on the other.

This, however, would not be the first international programme at senior middle school level in Jiangxi Province. Back in 2007, School B had started the first international collaborative programme - a 'Sino-Canadian' programme run jointly with the educational authorities of Nova Scotia, Canada. The programme charged at that time 30,000 yuan per year when the annual fees at a public senior middle school were less than 2,000 yuan. Enrolment in the programme grew from 18 in the inaugural cohort to 20 students in the subsequent two cohorts, and over 60 students in the fourth cohort. According to information available from School B's official website, the programme involved Nova Scotia educational authorities sending teachers to School B to teach the Nova Scotia high school curriculum to the enrolled students, who must at the same time also complete the Chinese senior middle curriculum with School B teachers. The completion of the Nova Scotia curriculum enabled the students to apply directly to Canadian universities, which was the explicit raison d'être for this programme; thus, although students were still required to complete the Chinese curriculum, in fact they only needed to pass the senior middle school exit exam (huikao) and not the high exam. According to a student at the Sino-Canadian Programme I spoke to, as all those who enrolled had their minds set on going to universities in Canada, they were free from the pressure of studying as intensely as their high exam-taking peers in School B's normal senior middle section.

Importantly, this student also revealed that, although the entry criteria of the Sino-Canadian Programme put special emphasis on the applicants' English scores in the middle exam, it was true that the overall cut-off point for admission was some 20 to 30 points (out of a total possible point score of 610) lower than School B's normal admission requirement. For some cynical observers, this was a programme that 'enabled rich but not very smart or hardworking kids to escape the high exam'; but the particular informant I spoke to praised the high quality and enjoyable Western style of learning it offered. School B's website shows that students of the first three cohorts who graduated between 2010 and 2012 went to destinations including University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, Dalhousie University, University of Ottawa and University of Prince Edward Island, among others.

School A's Deputy Head, however, was confident that the Sino-American Programme would be a greater success, and this was partly reflected in the fees: School A was ready to charge 80,000 yuan a year. 'Everybody wants to go to America', the Deputy Headmaster told me, articulating the new horizon of
Chinese educational desires: ‘American college education is the best in the world’. The idea of the Sino-American Programme is similar: to give enrolled students direct access to American undergraduate admission. The partner American school would send five teachers to Nanchang to cover the American part of the programme, based on the Advanced Placement (AP) curriculum. Similarly, School A also stressed that Sino-American Programme students needed to complete their Chinese senior middle school curriculum, and thus, in one school official’s words, the Programme ‘should be seen as even more challenging in one sense’. Nevertheless, a glossy online brochure explaining the Programme shows that students are encouraged to take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), SAT and AP exams as early as at the end of their second year (i.e. Grade 11). Not dissimilar to what the School B informant told me: since students are only expected to take the exit exams, the Chinese curriculum is significantly reduced, enabling them to enjoy the much more lively, diverse and attractive ‘American pedagogy’.

Although I left Nanchang just before the Sino-American Programme commenced, I was able to find out about the Programme’s subsequent developments. Between April and May 2013, the first cohort of 16 students selected from other received multiple offers from US universities and colleges. Indeed, the Programme’s webpage was strewed with headlines screaming ‘good news’, announcing the admission triumphs of this inaugural cohort, which completed the course in just two years instead of the planned three. Among the 16 graduates, one received seven offers respectively from Syracuse University, SUNY Binghamton, Centre College, DePauw University, Agnes Scott College, Lawrence University and Augsburg College; even the student with the fewest offers received two, from Washington University and Indiana University Bloomington respectively.

Of course, international education is nothing new. At the pre-tertiary level, the ‘American International Schools’ that exist in many developing country metropolises, catering to expatriates and local elites, have long epitomised pockets of educational exclusivity and privilege. British elite school Harrow, for instance, now has international schools in several Asian cities, including Beijing. The type of collaborative programmes I describe above, however, is a more recent phenomenon. In China, the high exam used to be known as the ‘single-log bridge’ (dōngmǎojī) that millions of students squeeze through with sheer determination and hard work. This seems to be changing slowly but steadily. Currently, not only do over 70 per cent of all those who take the high exam end up in some form of tertiary education, but it was officially reported that in 2009 a staggering 840,000 eligible examinees across the country gave up taking the exam, many probably thanks to the kind of developments I outlined in this section.

As urban Chinese residents become increasingly affluent, more and more parents entertain the option of letting their children receive less draconian and supposedly more enriching Western education by avoiding the local educational infrastructure. In this evolving Chinese public school set-up, which now includes ‘escape routes’ and ‘flyover bridges’, such as the Sino-Canadian/American programmes in Nanchang, a second meaning of elitism emerges, namely, as a kind of exclusivity of access and privilege of experiences that can be enjoyed if, and only if, the parents have the financial means. It is useful to remember that Nanchang parents who send their children to the Sino-American Programme not only have to pay two or three years of hefty programme fees in Jiangxi, they must also be wealthy enough to be able to afford their children’s university education expenses once in the USA, because these students would no longer be able to pass the high exam with sufficiently good marks to compete for the top university places within China.

Under the same roof as School A, therefore, an old form of elitism is newly smuggled in through the back door: the Sino-American students’ elegant grey-knitted cardigan-style uniform contrasts interestingly with the sporty tracksuit-style uniform worn by the rest of School A students, making a less-than-subtle statement about the former’s elite status. Trained by their US teachers, the level of fluency of their spoken English and even their social demeanour gradually show signs of divergence from that of their less elite peers — a divergence that will be radically widened when these privileged students actually head over to the USA to earn their college degrees, making them the ‘bilingual global elite Chinese’ that the Programme brochure promises.

In lieu of conclusion: some personal reflections

The notion of ‘elite’ or ‘elitism’ itself is not alien to the Chinese but, as I have tried to show, its semantics must be explored against a background of cultural historical traditions and socio-political contexts specific to China. For this exploratory chapter, which will hopefully be followed by more substantial research, a ‘conclusion’ would not be quite the right way to end. I close, therefore, with some reflections on educational elitism as it relates to my personal biography and educational trajectory.

Having been brought up in post-reform China and subsequently educated for a decade (1992–2002) under the Chinese school system, I had previously never perceived the word elite/elitism (jìngyíng) in a negative light. As I grew up, for me and most people around me, ‘elite’ was a good word and a good idea — something one strived hard to become. In 2002, a year before I was due to take the high exam, I was awarded a scholarship by the Singapore government to pursue undergraduate studies in this city-state, which we knew as an advanced Asian country governed by modern ‘Confucian elites’. The award of the scholarship, of course, was preceded by a selection process comprising written tests and interview, which in fact further vindicated me for my Chinese ‘scholars’ in Singapore the goodness of the term ‘elitism’, for, after all, where would we be if the Singapore system was not committed to an elitist educational philosophy and the value of meritocracy?

Subsequent exposure to Western academic discourse in the sociology of education made me realise that concepts of ‘elite’/’elitism’ are often viewed with suspicion, if not downright hostility, in at least the European context where the values of social democracy are still highly relevant. While I could understand this critical stance intellectually, I was never quite able to appreciate in a more experiential way the
anti-elitism of implicitly leftist sociological discourses. Writing this chapter has made me more aware that the elitism I knew and grew up with in the Chinese context was somewhat different from the elitism that was commonly critiqued in Western sociological discourse.

The irony, however, is that on returning to my own alma mater School A to undertake fieldwork a decade after I had left, I learned that the relatively recent stratification of Chinese society had precipitated the inevitable development of the second kind of elitism, which threatens to undermine the first. With this new lesson from home, I was finally able to better appreciate the critical sociology on elite education that I first encountered abroad.

Notes
2 Normally a senior middle school would have eight to 16 classes in each grade cohort; each class normally has 45–60 students.
4 In China, household registration (hukou) remains one significant tool for social regulation; people with rural household registration are denied many social welfare services. Yet, people with household registration in a particular place may be entitled to certain rights in other places; see Woronow (2004).
5 20–30 points out of 610 might seem moderate; however, given the number of candidates and the fierce competition, 20 points actually make a great difference in ranking.

References