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# Educating Competitive Students for a Competitive Nation: Why and How Has the Chinese Discourse of Competition in Education Rapidly Changed Within Three Decades?

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## Abstract

*In the late 1980s, the Chinese government instituted massive educational reforms to promote competition between schools and between students. By the late 1990s, however, educational reforms shifted to regulating and reducing competition in primary and secondary education. Why did a rapid policy swing occur? What was the rationale for the policy change? This article examines the Chinese discourse of competition in education by presenting a textual analysis of 101 commentary articles published by Chinese educators between 1986 and 2014. It reports two different views of competition among Chinese educators, one of which strongly prevailed throughout the 28 years. It also documents historical change in the authors' perceptions of competition: in the late 1980s, as a powerful solution to the educational and social problems facing China, and, by the late 1990s, as a major educational problem itself.*

**Keywords:** competition, educational reform, Chinese education, discourse analysis, neoliberalism, history of Chinese education

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, the Chinese central government initiated massive educational reforms to make schools more efficient and responsive to economic development. A major goal of the reforms was to introduce *competition mechanisms* (*jingcheng jizhi*) into secondary education and promote *competition consciousness* (*jingzheng yishi*) among teachers and students. By the late 1990s, however, education reforms in China shifted to regulating and reducing competition between schools and between students, and this emphasis continues today. What was the rationale for such a rapid shift in policy? How had Chinese educators and policymakers reconceptualized the role of competition in education during this period of time? These questions are critical for understanding the past, present, and future of education reform in China. They are also integral to understanding how global economic competition impacts education and youth development in diverse contexts.

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In this article, I analyze the development of educational discourses in China in the past three decades to demonstrate how global economic competition induces national ideological and institutional changes in education, which in turn profoundly influences the developmental context of school-aged youth. I present a thematic analysis of 101 commentary articles published by Chinese educators between 1986 and 2014. Through my analysis, I reveal two views of competition among Chinese educators, one of which strongly prevailed throughout the 28 years. I also illustrate shifts over time in the authors' perceptions of competition in education: in the 1980s, as a powerful solution to educational and social problems, and by the mid- to late-1990s, as a major educational problem itself.

In the following sections, I first contextualize the study by introducing the major educational policies implemented in China since the mid-1980s. Then, I introduce the methods used to select and analyze the commentary articles. Next, I introduce the two views of competition identified from the 101 articles. I then present my findings of the changes in the authors' perceptions of competition in education, as reflected in their (a) perceptions of the major problems facing Chinese education, (b) proposals for policy solutions, and (c) suggestions of classroom strategies to achieve the goals. In the final section, I briefly discuss the social basis of the dominant discourse of competition in contemporary China by locating my findings in the Chinese sociocultural and historical context as well as the broader international and theoretical context.

### **From Promoting Competition to Reducing Competition: Educational Reforms since the Mid-1980s**

China's economic reform since 1978 created a market economy characterized by a combination of neoliberal elements and authoritarian centralized control (Harvey, 2005). The neoliberal emphasis on free-market competition was introduced to secondary education in the 1980s (Chan & Ngok, 2001; Cheng, 1995; Ngok, 2007), in line with the global rise of neoliberalism that promotes the ideas of building a competitive market system in education (Apple, 1996, 2004; Robertson, 2000; Ross & Gibson, 2006; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). In England, for example, policies were implemented to introduce competition between schools and between students, and these policies have forced English schools to compete with one another for students and funding (Hursh, 2006). Parallel to the simultaneous neoliberal educational reforms in Western countries, Chinese reformers used the same keywords: *decentralization*, *marketization*, *standards*, and *options for parents*. While the central government maintained control over the purpose of education and system reforms, a series of policies were implemented to shift the responsibility of funding and managing schools to lower levels of government, and to open schools to market forces.

Two key policies marked the process of decentralization and marketization in Chinese education. In 1985, the Party's Central Committee issued the "Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure" (Ministry of Education, 1985). The decision called for linking education to economic reform, reducing rigid government control over schools, and allowing private organizations and individuals to establish and run schools. In 1993, the Ministry of Education issued the "Program for Education Reform and Development in China" to

quicken the pace of educational restructuring in order to attract private funding for educational development (Ministry of Education, 1993). In the following years, the pressure to generate revenue forced even public schools to run their own factories, offer after-school classes, and charge parents high fees (Lin, 2006).

Free-market competition created huge disparities among schools as they sought to distinguish themselves from competitors, especially in terms of students' test scores (Paine, 1998). Local government agencies ranked and graded schools based on students' test scores. Those in top positions were able to charge high fees and thus were better financed. To outdo their competitors, schools kept students in classes for long hours, assigned large amounts of homework, and organized countless mock exams. Government agencies also used test scores to rank and compare administrative districts in a single city and multiple cities in the same province. Agencies also focused on test scores when evaluating the job performances of teachers, school principals, education administrators, and even local government officials. Schools ranked teachers by the average scores of their classes and ranked individual students by their test scores. The pressure to outperform competitors existed at each level of the education system, and teachers and students in particular experienced toxic levels of stress (X. Zhao & Selman, 2015; Y. Zhao, 2009, 2014).

As a consequence, Chinese media were replete with reports of the harmful impact of academic pressure on children's physical and psychological health. Commentary journalists pleaded with policymakers to "save our children" (Lu & Gao, 2015). Facing mounting criticism, at the turn of the 21st century, the Chinese central government regularly issued new policies to narrow gaps between schools and to reduce stress on students. In 2000, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued the "Urgent Regulations for Alleviating the Academic Burden of Primary School Students" (Ministry of Education, 2000). The document set strict limits to the number of required textbooks (e.g., only one required textbook for each subject), amounts of homework (e.g., no homework for first and second graders, and homework that can be finished within an hour), and time students spent in school (e.g., no classes during weekends, holidays, and between school terms). Subsequently, similar regulations on secondary education were also released regularly. These regulations proved to be ineffective (Tang, 2006). Not only did schools find ways to circumvent the rules in order to keep their score-based ranks, but parents also sent their children to tutorial schools or hired private tutors so their children would not lag behind other students in their ranking positions.

As the situation persisted, in 2011, the Ministry of Education released the "Outline for National Mid-Term and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Planning (2010–2020)" (Ministry of Education, 2010). Like all previous documents on educational policy and reform, this document defined the goal of education as serving national interests by increasing China's global competitiveness. But the new plan no longer mentioned competition mechanism and competition consciousness. The new policies prohibited ranking schools based on student test scores, selecting students based on test scores, and publicizing students' ranks. The government also called for parents to work with schools to reduce students' academic pressure. Again, schools found ways to avoid these policies, and parents continued to send their children to tutorial classes (Y. Zhao, 2014).

At the end of 2013, the central government released a new wave of reforms to eliminate competition among schools and to reduce the pressure on students and parents to compete for spots in the academically elite and well-funded schools (Ministry of Education, 2013). To reduce gaps in resources and reputation among schools, local governments will no longer be allowed to classify schools into key (high-achieving) and non-key schools based on student test scores. Public schools will be built in standardized ways, and administrators and teachers will move around schools. Although reform policies like these have been documented in Western literature as evidence and explanations of China's success in reforming its education system and producing high-performing students (e.g., OECD, 2011), I argue that these policies often reflect persistent problems facing Chinese education rather than a new reality. Complicated social, cultural, and historical factors exist to prevent these policies from effectively reducing intense academic competition in Chinese education. An examination of how the discourse of competition has evolved since the late 1980s will illuminate the reality and future of China's educational reforms.

### **Method**

To unpack the rationale for the massive shift in educational policy in China in the last three decades, I systematically analyzed 101 commentary articles published by Chinese educators during this time, looking into the major themes and changes in their arguments. This textual approach to research comes from the traditions of cultural studies and the sociology of knowledge. Researchers use this method to “unpack, decode, and deconstruct” cultural models, looking into “the relationship between ideas and interests, culture and power, and meaning systems and political and economic systems” (Hays, 1997, p. 287). By teasing out the logic of the materials, researchers speculate on the social basis and social significance of an ideology. This approach is particularly useful for uncovering the historical development of belief systems. In contrast to a literature review that organizes theoretical arguments and research findings into a meaningful form, I treated the journal articles as raw data and systematically coded arguments to interpret the narratives and themes that emerged from their arguments.

### **Article Selection**

The 101 discussion articles were retrieved from the China Academic Journals Full-Text Database. The articles were published in national and regional education review journals. As indicated by the authors' affiliated institutions, two-thirds of the authors were educational researchers working in universities and research institutions. One-third of the 101 authors were practitioners in secondary schools. The practitioners and researchers often had different foci in their arguments on competition and education, and their different views enabled me to examine how competition was perceived from both conceptual and practical perspectives. These articles were primarily written in response to major educational policies issued by the Chinese central government between 1986 and 2014. The majority of the authors either provided conceptual arguments and commentaries on competition in secondary education, or reflected upon personal experiences in classroom teaching. Only a few authors supported their arguments with empirical evidence. Except for one empirical article, the other articles were shorter than

typical Western journal articles, their formats were more flexible, and their selection for publication did not go through the process of peer review. In many ways, they were similar to op-ed articles in Western newspapers instead of scholarly articles in Western academic journals.

For manageability, I selected articles that met the following criteria: (a) publications in journals in the Education/Social Sciences portion of the database; (b) titles with the following key phrases from education policies in the 1980–1990s: *competition in education* (*jiaoyu jingzheng*), *competition consciousness* (*jingzheng yishi*), *competition mechanisms* (*jingzheng jizhi*), or *competition education* (*jingzheng jiaoyu*); and (c) discussions focused on academic competition in college-track secondary education. I excluded articles about competition in higher education, vocational education, international education, and physical education from my analysis.

### Analytical Procedure

To systematically analyze the articles, I relied on the thematic approach to empirical data analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). I first examined a subsample of the articles, looking for patterns in their content. Four categories of themes emerged from this process: (a) normative arguments about competition, (b) perceptions of major educational problems related to competition, (c) proposals of policy solutions, and (d) suggestions of classroom teaching strategies for fixing the educational problems. I then compared the dominant arguments within each of the four categories. Through this process, I discovered that, while one particular view of competition remained dominant, authors' opinions about educational problems facing China, directions for new policies, and effective teaching strategies changed over time. I therefore examined all the articles again to identify change at two levels: the manifest level (historical change mentioned by the authors), and the latent level (different arguments in articles published at different times). This analysis led me to divide the 28 years into three different time periods: 1986–1989, 1990–1996 and 1997–2014. The division was based on differences in dominant opinions even though different voices existed across the three time periods.

## Findings

### Finding 1: Two Views of Competition

Within the normative arguments category, I identified two different views of competition: competition is desirable and inevitable, and competition is a double-edged sword. The former was supported by over 80% of the articles. The latter was supported by about 15% of the articles.

**Competition is desirable and inevitable.** According to this view, competition is natural and beneficial to the success of the individual and the progress of society (Mei, 2001; Qian, 2004; W. Wang, 1996). At the individual level, competition is human nature and the motivation of human development. Even though all human beings have the desire to compete, the will to compete is stronger in some individuals than in others. Competition also motivates individuals to build a strong will, realize their potential, develop their wisdom, and increase the quality and efficiency of their work (Huang, 2004; Luo, 1993). Some authors argued that “competition consciousness is the basis of

individual creativity and is a required quality of the modern individual” (W. Wang, 1996, p. 20). Others claimed that “in highly competitive modern society, only competitive individuals can survive” (Mei, 2001, p. 55; Qian, 2004, p. 78).

At the societal level, the authors argued that competition exists in all human societies at all times (Feng & Jing, 2011). As some authors claimed, “Survival of the fittest is a natural law. It is the law underlying all social phenomena” (He, 2002, p. 54; Y. Li, 2005, p. 68). Others similarly argued that competition is a driving force of scientific development and social progress, and without competition, human civilization and society will not progress (Mei, 2001; Yang & Zhan, 2000; Q. Zhang, 2003). Many authors also argued that competition is a key characteristic of a knowledge-based market economy. They note that it is wrong to see competition as a social illness of capitalism and to link competition to selfish behaviors (as was the dominant discourse in the pre-reform collectivist era) (Tao, 1988).

This discourse assumes that individual students’ competitiveness can enhance national competitiveness in the global economic marketplace. The authors claimed that the 20th century is characterized by competition among nations, groups, and individuals, and that global competition in science and technology depends on the *quality (suzhi)* of its people (J. Cao, 1988; Qian & Xu, 1988; T. Yu, 2007). The Chinese term *suzhi*, often translated as *quality*, refers to embodied human qualities such as physical strength, intellectual capacity, and social skills. According to the authors, Chinese history has seen glorious times as well as times of suffering and shame; therefore, revival of the nation depends on the competition consciousness and competition capacity of the country’s youth (Z. Chen, 2005). Chinese youth must fulfill their responsibility of reviving the nation by learning to compete among themselves. Some authors argued that “non-competitive nations and groups will not survive; non-competitive individuals will have a fruitless life” (Feng & Jing, 2011, p. 7). The authors agreed that, since competition is inevitable, students must understand competition and learn to compete in the right way.

**Competition is a double-edged sword.** This view holds that, even though competition is part of human nature, it can both benefit and harm individuals and society. On one hand, competition motivates individuals, stimulates their creativity, and promotes interpersonal cooperation. On the other hand, it produces more “losers” than “winners,” puts individuals under stress, and creates hostility and jealousy in interpersonal relationships. Therefore, it should not be considered only good or bad. Rather, it is similar to explosives, which can be used destructively in wars, or productively in construction work (S. Chen, 2000; Dong, 2005; Feng & Jing, 2011; Guo, 2001; Jiang, 2009; G. Li, 2001; Y. Li, 2005; Si, 1989; L. Wang, 2002; S. Wang & Yang, 2002; Xie, 2001).

Following the same logic, some authors further distinguished between benign competition and destructive competition. These authors theorized that benign competition, or constructive competition, aims to facilitate improvement of all individuals (Guo, 2001; R. Zhang & Yang, 1997). Constructive competition is based on values such as self-respect, self-confidence, self-reliance, the spirit of enterprising, and striving for excellence. Furthermore, when humanist caring, cooperation, and social harmony are emphasized, competition is consistent with values of patriotism and collectivism (Z. Chen, 2005). In contrast, *destructive competition* or *hyper-competition*

(*guodu jingzheng*) leads to the use of tricks, such as cheating and lies to gain competitive advantage. One author argued that hyper-competition “often aims at short-term selfish gains at the expense of others and sacrifices long-term benefits” (Xie, 2001, p. 14). To summarize, when competition was discussed as a normative concept, the view of competition in education as desirable and inevitable remained dominant among Chinese educators across the 28 years. In practice, however, as demonstrated in the following section, the authors’ perceptions of the major problems facing Chinese education has switched from seeing the promotion of competition as a way to increase efficiency and quality of education in the 1980s to considering it as the cause of toxic levels of stress on students, teachers, and the system itself in the late 1990s.

### **Finding 2: Is Competition the Solution or the Problem? Changes in Educators’ Perceptions from 1986 to 2014**

My analysis suggested a pattern of pendula swings in dominant discourse regarding competition in education within the three decades from 1986 to 2014, a pattern that characterizes Chinese education reform over most of the 20th century (Pepper 1980, 2000). I show this pattern in Table 1 by summarizing and comparing the major arguments about competition in education that I identified from the 101 articles published during the three periods of 1986–1989, 1990–1996, and 1997–2014, respectively. These arguments centered around three themes: perceptions of educational problems facing Chinese education, proposed policy solutions, and suggested classroom strategies. In this section, I will explain the major educational policies issued by the Chinese central government during each period, and then explain what I identified as the central tension in the discourse of education within that period.

**1986–1989: Debates on competition in secondary education.** In 1985, the Chinese central government issued the “Decision of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Reform of the Educational Structure” (Ministry of Education, 1985), aiming to (a) link education to economic reform, (b) reduce rigid government controls over schools, and (c) allow private organizations and individuals to establish and run schools. My review of the articles published between 1986 and 1989 showed that Chinese educators debated two issues related to the new policy: first, whether competition should be introduced into secondary education, and second, whether competition should be promoted between teachers and between students. Proponents of competition argued that competition would motivate individuals to strive for success and motivate schools to increase their efficiency (e.g., J. Cao, 1988; Qian & Xu, 1988). They also argued that competition was the only way to modernize China’s secondary education. Opponents were adamant that the economic rule of privileging the superior and eliminating the inferior should not apply to education, and that introducing competition into primary and secondary education would have disastrous effects (Feng & Liang, 1988).



Table 1  
*Summary of Educators' Perceptions of Competition in Three Periods*

	1986–1989	1990–1996	1997–2014
<i>Perceptions of Educational problems</i>	An egalitarian system leads to low motivation in teaching and learning; students despise competition	Competition based on standardized test scores harms students' psychological health and long-term development	Competition in education is “out of control” and unfair, leading education astray, exacerbating social inequality, and causing psychological and behavioral problems
<i>Proposed Policy Solutions</i>	Authors debate whether to promote competition between schools and between students	Authors clarify the concept and goal of competition in education and promote “fair” competition between schools	Authors debate whether to encourage competition, promote cooperative competition, or reinstall the traditional value of <i>rang</i>
<i>Suggested Teaching Strategies</i>	Teachers create a democratic atmosphere to promote students' self-confidence and self-expression	Teachers promote “healthy competition” between students	Teachers guide students' attitudes about competition and foster a sense of collectivity among students

***Perceived educational problem(s).*** Authors argued that the major educational problem during this period was the gap between what teachers taught in school and the skills and knowledge students needed in a rapidly changing society. Some authors pointed out that, under state control, schools adopted the same goals, structure, curricula, teaching materials, and teaching plan (J. Cao, 1988). Within an egalitarian system of school funding and teacher salary, secondary school reflected “no pressure, no motivation, no dynamics, no differences, no responsibility, and no risk” (Qian & Xu, 1988, p.1). Teachers taught their students to prioritize collective interests and sacrifice self-interests. Consequently, students had a strong sense of responsibility, but not a strong sense of individual rights. In other words, “they were dependent rather than autonomous; they were rule-followers instead of pioneers” (J. Cao, 1988, p. 128). Other authors attributed the problem to the influence of the Confucian humanistic tradition on education, arguing that “educators follow the Confucian Feudalist tradition to focus on fostering qualities such as kindness and honesty, respecting teachers, and yielding out of courtesy.... students are blindly content. They despise competition and are not innovative and competitive” (Tao, 1988, p. 81). In other words, the authors perceived the major

problem facing Chinese education at the time as the lack of competition between schools and the lack of competitive consciousness among students. It was not just an educational problem, but also a broader institutional and cultural malaise that had been generated in the egalitarian system in the 1950s–1970s and was rooted in the enduring Confucian cultural tradition in China. And this problem was holding China back on its path to modernization.

**Proposed policy solutions.** Agreeing that educational reforms were necessary, the authors were divided on whether promoting competition was the solution. Some argued that, as Chinese society was transitioning to a market economy with limited educational resources, it was inevitable and desirable to introduce competition mechanisms into education and to promote competition consciousness among students. Competition mechanisms, according to its proponents, would solve the problems linked to the pre-reform egalitarian system and make school management more efficient, cost-effective, and humane (Qian & Xu, 1988). Competition would also change the old practice of despotism and top-down imposition, and foster democratic disposition among individuals (Qian & Xu, 1988). Further, competition consciousness would motivate school administrators to learn new managerial experiences and hire more capable teachers. Finally, proponents believed competition would motivate teachers to improve the quality of teaching and students to improve their academic performance (J. Cao, 1988).

In order to generate a more competitive environment, these authors supported the idea of a decentralized education system in which school principals are given more autonomy to make financial and managerial decisions. For example, in a decentralized context, principals could run *school enterprises* (*xiao yuan jing ji*) and generate income from businesses and private resources. Further, principals could link teachers' salary and benefits to their schools' economic success (J. Cao, 1988). They also argued that private organizations and individuals in China should be allowed to establish and run schools to foster competition between public schools and private schools. By instituting these reforms, the authors argued that schools and teachers would be incentivized to increase the quality of education.

In contrast, opponents of competition argued that introducing competition mechanisms into secondary education would have disastrous consequences. They argued that education and economy have distinct aims, and thus follow different rules. Economic competition aims to eliminate bad products and services, whereas education aims to promote the development of students at all levels. If education follows the rule of economic competition and equates students to products, “the nature of socialist education would be changed” (Feng & Liang, 1988, p. 24). Feng and Liang (1988) also argued that efficiency—an economic goal—should not be an educational goal. Unlike industrial production, which can be accelerated through new technologies, learning takes time and continuous effort. Similarly, Ding (1988) argued that competition should not be introduced into sectors such as education, health care, basic research, and public security, simply because in these sectors, outcomes should not be evaluated by economic standards. Ding further claimed that “trying to solve educational problems by opening schools to market competition is at best an oversimplified way of thinking” (p. 24).

Between the proponents and opponents were a group of authors who took the middle ground, supporting the idea of introducing competition mechanisms to the processes of

principal appointment and teacher hiring, but cautioning against promoting competition among individual teachers and students. These authors agreed that competition motivates individuals to strive for success and promotes industrial development and technological advancement. Thus, competition should not be despised as a social illness of capitalism (a discourse and propaganda in China throughout the 1950s–1970s), but can also be used to benefit socialist economy (Liu, 1990; Si, 1989). However, these authors argued against promoting competition among teachers and students. Joining the opponents of promoting competition, these authors argued that learning should take place in a cooperative environment in which learners share knowledge. “When competition is introduced to higher education, it will do more harm than good; when it is introduced to primary and secondary education, it will do all harm and no good at all” (Mo, 1988, p. 26). These authors observed serious problems associated with intense competition. For example, to raise promotion rates, schools grouped higher-scoring students and provided them with the best teachers; lower-scoring students were neglected or pushed out of school (this would only worsen in the 1990s and the new century). Consequently, distorted competition severely harmed the psychological health of both high-achieving and low-achieving students, making the former “cold and selfish” and the latter “anxious and lacking self-confidence” (Si, 1989, p. 7). Furthermore, many poorly equipped and understaffed schools would close within a system of market competition, leaving students with no access to formal education (which is exactly what happened in the 1990s, especially in rural areas).

***Suggested classroom strategies.*** Proponents of competition argued that educators should advance students’ sense of self and foster their high ambitions in order to promote their competition consciousness. First of all, metaphors should be changed from emphasizing the individual’s smallness and irrelevance (in comparison to the collective, the universe, and history) to emphasizing the power of the individual spirit. Instead of encouraging students to see themselves as “a drop of water” or “a small piece of grass” (Tao, 1988, p. 81), as in the pre-reform egalitarian system, educators should encourage students to compare themselves to images such as “a pine tree” or “an eagle on top of a high mountain” (p. 81). Teachers should also give students more autonomy to make their own choices in school activities. In addition, authors advised schools and teachers to organize frequent competitive activities in order to strengthen students’ sense of self and satisfy their desire to compete. The authors also suggested using financial reward and punishment as a strategy to motivate teachers and students (Qian & Xu, 1988).

Those who rejected competition voiced concerns about Chinese students’ sense of self. They agreed that educators should foster students’ self-confidence, self-reliance, and sense of agency. They suggested that teachers should create a democratic atmosphere in school, allowing students to express their opinions and personalities instead of emphasizing prompt obedience and self-deprecation (Si, 1989). To sum, in the latter half of the 1980s, as Chinese government policies in education and broader social and economic reforms were moving away from the central planning system in the 1950s–1970s and toward marketization (with Chinese characteristics of centralized control), Chinese educators disagreed about promoting competition between schools and among individual teachers and students. The authors who supported the promotion of competition in education strongly believed that competition would liberate individuals’

entrepreneurial and creative energy from the constraints of the previous central planning system and the hierarchical tradition in Chinese society (e.g., Qian & Xu, 1988). Despite opponents' warning of the negative consequence of promoting competition in education, the logic that competition between schools and among students is desirable because global competition among nations is inevitable seemed to be impeccable. The belief that promoting competition mechanisms and competition consciousness would solve the perceived problems of "no pressure, no motivation, no dynamics, no differences, no responsibility, and no risk" (Qian & Xu, 1988, p.1) in Chinese schools prevailed.

**1990–1996: Promoting and regulating competition.** During this period, the reforms to decentralize education continued. In 1993, the Ministry of Education issued the "Program for Education Reform and Development in China", which quickened the pace of educational restructuring and rendered the education sector a money-making industry (Ngok, 2007). Articles published during this period no longer featured heated debates on competition. Instead, authors seemed to recognize the problem arising from competition in school and focused their discussion on how to reconceptualize competition in education and regulate it at both policy and school levels.

**Perceived educational problem(s).** As in previous years, during this period, authors found the conflation of educational competition with economic competition problematic. For example, Liu (1990) observed, "We easily make the mistake of going from one extreme to another. Once it is proposed that there should be competition in education, all the ideas and rules in economic competition are used in education. It is dogmatic and out of touch with reality" (p. 83).

Some authors were also concerned that competition among students was based on standardized tests, and this practice led to the neglect of students' moral and physical development (Luo, 1993). While official guidelines stated that the goal of education was to promote students' academic, moral, and physical development, no reliable measures existed to evaluate the latter two. Furthermore, the teacher evaluation system did not take into consideration teachers' efforts to promote students' moral and physical development, which also contributed to the one-sided emphasis on test scores in Chinese schools (Luo, 1993).

In contrast to the authors from the late 1980s, who expressed concerns about students' weak sense of self and low desire to compete with others, by the 1990s, authors were more concerned about how to direct students' strong sense of self and their strong desire to win in competition (e.g., Gao, 1994). The authors also worried about low-scoring students whose talents in non-academic aspects were not acknowledged by adults. They were concerned that such students would completely lose interest in schoolwork and develop low self-esteem. Some of these students also cheated on tests in an attempt to increase their test scores (Du, 1994; Gao, 1994; Yao & Wang, 1995).

**Proposed policy solutions.** In order to develop policy solutions to the perceived problems, some authors tried to clarify the goal of competition in education. For example, some argued that competition in education should follow certain principles. First, the purpose of competition should be clarified as aiming to motivate educators and students, and improve the efficiency of the education system, (although authors did not define *efficiency*). Second, the outcome of competition should be evaluated by the quality of education instead of by test scores, (although authors did not discuss how to measure

quality). Third, competition should be regulated by the rule of fairness. Fairness was defined as equal status and opportunities among competitors and full transparency in competition. Fourth, cooperation among competitors should be promoted so that students would not try to win at the expense of others.

Others, often teachers, gave more concrete suggestions on how to promote fair competition. These authors criticized existing educational policies for strongly favoring the better-funded and high-achieving key schools and letting those schools recruit the more capable students (e.g., Gao, 1994; W. Wang, 1996). As a consequence, they argued, poorly funded schools in less developed areas that received less capable students were further disadvantaged in market competition. Authors suggested that schools should be classified into different categories by government agencies based on factors such as level of funding and promotion rate, and competition should only take place between schools that belong to the same category (e.g., Yao & Wang, 1995). These authors also offered suggestions for promoting fair competition among teachers. For example, teachers' salary, benefits, and promotion should all be linked to their performance: high-achieving teachers should be rewarded and low-achieving teachers penalized. Moreover, the authors argued for a more transparent and objective teacher evaluation system. Importantly, some authors argued that evaluating teacher performance by student test scores might not be scientific, but that it is objective and therefore acceptable (e.g., Luo, 1993).

**Suggested teaching strategies.** Similar to authors from the previous period, between 1990–1996, authors' suggestions about teaching strategies focused on how to promote students' competitive consciousness. The strategies included creating a competitive atmosphere in classrooms and schools, guiding students to specify learning goals, and promoting the value of healthy competition among students (Gao, 1994; W. Wang, 1996; Yao & Wang, 1995). Specifically, authors suggested that teachers set up a contest forum in the classroom and post lists of honored students and the best in class to visually stimulate students' competitive consciousness. Teachers should also help students set realistic goals and facilitate competition among students at the same academic levels. Finally, teachers should pay close attention to negative attitudes and behaviors among students, such as the feeling of inferiority, the tendency to give up, and cheating (Gao, 1994; W. Wang, 1996; Yao & Wang, 1995).

**1997–2014: Competition, cooperation, and “yielding out of courtesy.”** Facing mounting criticism of hyper-competition between schools and between students, by the late 1990s, the Chinese central government began to issue new policies to narrow resource gaps among schools and reduce academic competition among students based on test scores. In 1999, the central government issued the “Decision to Deepen Educational Reforms and Comprehensively Promote Education for Quality” (Ministry of Education, 1999). This document defined the goal of education as promoting Chinese youth's comprehensive development in academic, moral, and physical aspects. “Education for the purpose of increasing the quality of the population” or “education for quality” (*suzhi jiaoyu*) became the new keywords of China's education reform. In fact, as the anthropologist Andrew Kipnis (2006) points out, the government used the discourse of *suzhi* to describe any proposal for education reform, no matter how much the proposed ideas contradicted each other.

The policies issued during this time focused on reducing academic pressure and promoting students' holistic development rather than promoting competition. In 2010, Chinese Premier Wen Jiabao stated that the most important goals for future education reforms were to reduce the academic burden on students, foster the development of intellect and practical abilities, and teach Chinese youth how to use their minds and hands and how to be good people (Wen, 2010). Premier Wen's statement was reflected in the 2011 policy, the "Outline for National Mid-Term and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Planning (2010–2020)" (Ministry of Education, 2010). The policy maintained that the goal of education was to serve national interests by increasing China's competitiveness in the world, but it did not mention competition mechanism or competition consciousness. Instead, the policy emphasized a well-rounded education focusing on enhancing students' individual abilities and meeting each student's developmental needs (Ministry of Education, 2010).

This reform shift was reflected in the journal publications during this period. Unlike the articles from the first period (1986–1989), which focused on whether to introduce competition to secondary education, and the articles from the second period (1990–1996), which focused on how to regulate competition, the articles published during the third period showed the coexistence of three concepts: competition, cooperation, and *rang* (yielding out of courtesy). *Rang* is a traditional value that emphasizes the restraint of personal desires to address others' needs and interests and to ensure the common good. In the late 1980s, authors considered similar values to represent a harmful Confucian Feudalist tradition that should be eradicated and replaced by competitive consciousness. As detailed below, between 1997 and 2014, some authors discussed how to reinstate the traditional value of *rang*, while others continued to promote competition or cooperative competition in school.

**Perceived educational problem(s).** Beginning in 1997, authors expressed concerns about the negative impact of academic competition on school and society, using frequently terms such as "out of control," "alienated," and "exacerbated social inequality and injustice" (S. Chen, 2000; G. Li, 2001; Y. Li, 2005; S. Wang & Yang, 2002; J. Yu, 1997; F. Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Shi, 2006; R. Zhang & Yang, 1997; Zhou, 1997). Drawing upon Karl Marx's notion of alienation, the authors described the situation as follows: "The more education students receive, the more they are controlled by competition and are alienated from themselves, and the less creative and imaginative they are" (Wang & Yang, 2002, p. 8). Some authors critically pointed out that, since the late 1980s, many considered privileging the superior and eliminating the inferior (*yousheng lietai*) or survival of the fittest (*shizhe shengcun*) (Y. Li, 2005; R. Zhang & Yang, 1997) as laws explaining all social phenomena. Others commented that, in official guidelines for education, competition was promoted as a way to increase students' *suzhi* (quality); in reality, however, academic competition centered on test scores and education only functioned to provide credentials (Guo, 2001). In other words, competition as a means of making education more efficient overshadowed the end of education, which is to foster learning (Y. Li, 2005).

Specifically, authors discussed three problems facing education. First, at the policy level, educational goals were vague, content was arbitrary, and assessment narrowly focused on academic performance (e.g., Zhou, 1997). Zhou (1997) argued that, since the

1980s, the goal of education was linked neither to the political, economic, and cultural development of Chinese society, nor to the development and wellbeing of individual students. Without the guidance of clear educational goals, schools favored competition with other schools over teaching that would benefit students' development. Assessment (based on standardized tests), which should function to guide teaching activities, focused on the easiest task of assessing students' grasp of knowledge. Because it was harder to assess students' intellectual, social, and moral development, these were simply not assessed.

The second problem, according to some authors, was that competition between schools had not been fair, leading to corruption and imbalanced distribution of educational resources (e.g., S. Wang & Yang, 2002; Zhou, 1997). The central government had not effectively regulated competition. Due to the lack of transparent and trustworthy evaluation systems, fairness of competition was undermined by despotism and bribery. Unequal competition resulted in huge financial disparities between urban and rural schools, more and less developed regions, key schools and non-key schools, and schools charging high fees and schools relying on the largesse of benefactors. Furthermore, governments' failure to collect funding from society to invest in schools had immeasurable negative consequences on education.

A third problem authors identified was that competition between students had become uncontrollable, leading to psychological problems, antisocial behaviors, and even suicidal tendencies among both students and teachers (e.g., G. Li, 2001; Y. Li, 2005; S. Wang & Yang, 2002). Frequent tests put students under toxic levels of pressure and stress; classification and differential treatment of students based on test scores severely harmed their psychological health (Guo, 2001; S. Wang & Yang, 2002). Authors who were also school teachers reported that some students avoided participating in competitive activities in school as they feared being labeled as losers (e.g., Yang & Zhan, 2000). Other students lost interest in schoolwork when higher-scoring students refused to help them or called them "slow" (Yang & Zhan, 2000). These authors were particularly concerned that, due to the one-child policy initiated in 1978 (and ended in 2015), the majority of urban children in school had no siblings and had grown up spending most of their time with toys, TV, and indulgent adults, but little time with peers. The authors claimed that many children were either self-centered, or dependent and timid. When competing with others in school, some students were selfish, cold, and fragile; others were aggressive and destructive.

**Suggested policy solutions.** As in previous years, the authors agreed on the problems, but disagreed on how to address them. Three different solutions were proposed: promoting and regulating competition, promoting cooperative competition, and reinstating the Confucian tradition of *rang*. The first group of authors defended competition in education, arguing that since students live in a competitive society, it was important that they learn to compete with each other in school (C. Cao & Chen, 1999; Z. Chen, 2005; Feng & Jing, 2011; He, 2002; Huang, 2004; Y. Li, 2005; Mei, 2001; Qian, 2004; Tan, 2001; J. Wang, 2005; T. Yu, 2007; Q. Zhang, 2003). Others argued that *competition* was a neutral word and its effect on education depended on whether it was well regulated to follow the rule of fairness (J. Wang, 2005; L. Wang, 2002). These authors emphasized that "education for quality" was not against academic competition

altogether but against a singular emphasis on it. Therefore, these authors asserted that teachers should encourage students to compete with each other, not only in academic achievement but also in social and moral development (C. Cao & Chen, 1999).

These authors' proposed policy solutions aligned with those published during previous periods. For example, to further promote competition, some authors (e.g., J. Wang, 2005; Zhou, 1997) proposed that government agencies should educate the public about the importance of competition so that the idea would gain wide acceptance and gradually become part of the Chinese cultural tradition. Second, in broader Chinese society, better-educated individuals should be paid more so that education would be more valued. Third, new policies should be made to give schools more autonomy in managing financial and human resources. The schools that are able to produce skilled laborers of better quality within shorter times should be rewarded financially (Zhou, 1997). To address the problem of unfair competition between schools and to better regulate competition, the authors proposed that the government should set up strict and fair rules and make sure everyone was equal in front of the rules (but these authors did not provide examples for "strict and fair rules"). Furthermore, executive power should effectively enforce the rules, and government agencies must penalize those who break the rules (J. Wang, 2005; Zhou, 1997).

The second group of authors called for promoting cooperative competition to counteract the negative impact of individualistic competition promoted in Chinese schools (Qiu, 1998; Yang & Wang, 1997; Yang & Zhan, 2000; R. Zhang & Yang, 1997). They argued that the valuing of competition is hard-won in Chinese society, a society that has been under the influence of the Confucian tradition and, more recently, a central-planning system (both of which were assumed to be against competition). The authors argued that it was a mistake to consider competition and cooperation mutually exclusive (G. Li, 2001; R. Zhang & Yang, 1997). Other authors (e.g., Qiu, 1998) argued that competition and cooperation were two different ways that adolescents interact with peers. Growing up in one-child families, many Chinese adolescents do not have enough opportunities to cooperate with peers and learn how to compete with others in appropriate ways. Therefore, schools should provide them with social opportunities to develop the necessary skills to compete and cooperate (Qiu, 1998). As was the case in previous years, most authors did not mention how to promote cooperation between students at the policy level. The few authors who attempted to propose policy-level changes fell into formalism. For example, Qiu (1998) called for building cooperative relationships between schools and advocating the value of cooperation between teachers and students. However, authors did not discuss how to structurally encourage and reward cooperation between schools and between teachers.

Other authors, after pointing out the negative impact of intense competition, tentatively suggested that the Confucian value of *rang* might have implications for education in China today (S. Chen, 2000; F. Zhang, Wang, Zhang, & Shi, 2006). S. Chen (2000) reviewed ancient Chinese philosophers' arguments on *competition* (*zheng*) and *yielding* (*rang*), and discussed how they had advocated the value of yielding to others at times of turmoil. To build a good sociopolitical and sociocultural order, the ancient philosophers called for both individuals and the government to control their undesirable passions, such as the love of mastery, self-aggrandizement, resentment, and



covetousness. Making the same normative requests for contemporary Chinese education and society, S. Chen (2000) did not suggest concrete policies within the social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of China today. In the only empirical article, F. Zhang et al. (2006) reported a study that investigated how parental emphasis of competition and yielding to others was related to academic performance. They found that students whose parents emphasized both competition and yielding to others performed better than students whose parents emphasized competition only. It was unclear whether the researchers controlled for the levels of parental education in their study. Nevertheless, the research on yielding suggested a new interest in ancient Chinese moral philosophy.

**Suggested teaching strategies.** Authors distinguished between goal-oriented competition that focuses on achieving one's own goals and other-oriented competition that focuses on defeating others (C. Cao & Chen, 1999). They suggested that teachers should promote goal-oriented competition and avoid ranking students by their test scores. Teachers should also give more time and opportunities to students in completing tasks until they catch up with others. In addition, teachers should acknowledge students' strengths in different areas to foster their self-confidence, encourage low-scoring students, and avoid criticizing them (C. Cao & Chen, 1999). Other authors (e.g., Mei, 2001) emphasized the importance of guiding students' attitudes about competition. Specifically, teachers should advise students to learn from each other and not to feel jealous. Teachers should also help students deal with their feelings of frustration and inferiority by adjusting their goals of competition and improving their strategies for competition (Mei, 2001).

Other authors proposed promoting cooperative competition in the classroom (e.g., Qiu, 1998). They suggested teachers foster a *sense of collectivity (jiti yishi)* between students, an expression frequently used in the collective system before the economic reforms. For this purpose, teachers should encourage teamwork by, for example, asking students to share materials, arranging students to form assignment groups, and evaluating students' performances as a team. The authors, however, did not discuss what would motivate teachers to implement these activities in their classrooms when facing high pressures to increase their students' test scores, or how teachers could reconcile the goal of promoting a sense of collectivity with an education system that was based on standardized tests and individualistic competition. Similarly, the authors who called for attention to the traditional value of *rang* did not suggest concrete policies or classroom practices for reinstating the value of *rang* to others.

### Discussion

Through my analysis of the discourse of competition among Chinese educators, I aimed to unearth the key assumptions and rationales behind Chinese government's reforms to promote competition in education in the 1980s, and the continuous and ongoing effort to reduce competition since the 1990s. My analysis shows that the dominant discourse in the 1980s defined competition as a new value for modernizing Chinese individuals and society and a mechanism for increasing the efficiency of China's educational system. I have demonstrated how Chinese reformers and their supporters used this ideology of competition as a discursive weapon to fight against the ideologies of egalitarianism, central planning, and collectivity. Many authors argued that, through

competition, schools and individuals would gain political, economic, social, and cultural freedom from state control. They expected that competition in education would lead to individual liberation and creativity, and the acknowledgement of talent and hard work in Chinese society. In this discursive context, the government issued sweeping policies in the 1980s to promote competition between schools and between students, despite a few critical voices. As the over-emphasis of individualistic competition took its toll, Chinese educators used new discourses, such as *suzhi* and the traditional value of *rang*, to reinterpret the goal of competition, differentiate its various forms, and change its supremacy, if not its legitimacy.

The positive view of competition among Chinese educators, especially in the late 1980s and early 1990s, can be attributed to the influence of the aforementioned global neoliberal movement in education. Researchers have documented the repercussions of such educational movements in various countries (Apple, 1996, 2004; Robertson, 2000; Ross & Gibson, 2006; Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998). For example, similar to Chinese educators' observations of the negative impact of competition on teaching and learning, researchers in England also noted that competition harms the culture of English schools, undermines teacher professionalism and student success, and exacerbates inequality between schools and between students (Gewirtz, 2002; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Gillborn & Youdell, 2000).

However, Chinese educators' overwhelming endorsement of educational competition must be understood in the Chinese cultural and historical context. That is, competition is deeply connected with China's cultural values, but is also a psychological and ideological reaction to both external influences and challenges and internal tension and change in the 20th century. First, I believe that the dominant view of competition is connected to a meritocratic cultural tradition that emphasizes individual competitive achievement in scholarship (even though it is debatable whether the traditional Chinese Imperial Examinations system, or *keju*, is meritocratic in reality). Within this cultural context, for example, a competition-based public education system and concerns about academic competition and stress existed in China prior to the 1980s, particularly in the 1930s and 1950s (Pepper, 1991, 2000). It was during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) that education was directed toward a proletarian model, which emphasized students' participation in politics and practice rather than competitive academic achievement (Pepper, 2000). Under the collective system, individuality was repressed and individual efforts and achievement were not acknowledged and rewarded. As a consequence, in the reform era of the 1980s and 1990s, Chinese academic and economic elites, well-represented among the authors in my analysis here, enthusiastically embraced the idea that competition in school and society would liberate individual creativity and promote societal progress. In fact, educational reforms in the 1980s aimed to return educational systems and practices to those from the 1950s (Pepper, 2000). The government reinstated the pre-1966 education system, including the National College Entrance Exam and the pagoda system of categorizing schools into different tiers based on students' test scores. The purpose of secondary schooling returned to preparing students for the competition- and test-based National College Entrance Exam.

Second, one can trace the dominant view of competition to the influence of Herbert Spencer's (1892) social theory in contemporary China, specifically his emphasis on

“survival of the fittest.” In an article entitled “Going Astray on the Way to Modernization: Social Darwinist Ideas at the End of Qing and the Beginning of the Republic,” the Chinese historian Jilin Xu (2010) analyzes how Chinese society, in the mid-1880s, was compelled by foreign invasion to adopt a new social order that centered on the goal of strengthening the nation-state. Xu (2010) argues that Spencer’s idea about the efficient and adaptive individual created in free competition deeply influenced Chinese intellectuals who searched for ways to transform the Chinese individual and modernize the country. Xu argues that, due to leading intellectuals’ advocacy, by the late Qing dynasty (1644–1911), the Spencerian hero had replaced the traditional Confucian gentleman as the ideal national personification. In the context of great social and political turmoil, and under the influence of Western materialism, Chinese society began its metamorphosis from a Confucian nation that emphasized moral cultivation and despised material pursuit to a society in which everyone was thrown into the maelstrom of competing-for-survival struggle. In the 21st century, the agenda of educational reform changed from promoting competition to reducing competition, although the reform has not, in fact, reduced competition (Zhao, Selman, & Haste, 2015). Yet, the basic assumption about the purpose of education remains unchanged. That is, education should serve the purpose of promoting economic development and enhancing national competitiveness in the global economic market, as shown in the recent “Outline for National Mid-Term and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development Planning (2010–2020)” (Ministry of Education, 2010).

To summarize, the discourse of competition for survival became a dominant Chinese ideology as society modernized. Ideologies, according to Clifford Geertz (1973), are often responses to cultural, social, and psychological strain; they function to make a new politics possible by providing the concepts and images necessary for their justification and promotion. In recent Chinese history, Chinese elites have vigorously promoted the idea of competition for survival at times of social and cultural transitioning, as indicated by Xu’s (2010) historical discussion and my analysis here. In the mid-19th century, foreign invasion and the perception of China as weak and backward compelled Chinese intellectuals and political leaders to advocate competition for the purpose of freeing the political system and individual consciousness from the governance of Confucian tradition. In the late 20th century, Chinese leaders used the ideology of competition to fill the void left by disillusionment with communist ideologies, promote economic development through privatization (with state guidance), legitimize the central government’s decision to facilitate marketization in sectors such as education and healthcare, and promote individual responsibility for their own welfare. Accordingly, the effect of Chinese government’s current and future efforts to reduce academic competition in school will be limited until the dominant discourse of education and social reforms shifts from increasing China’s national competitiveness on the global market to making Chinese society a more equal, just, and humane one for its own people. Debates about required qualities for the modern individual and the meaning of keywords, such as *competition*, *cooperation*, and *compassion*, will endure among Chinese educators.

### Author Biography

**Xu Zhao** is currently a Werklund Postdoctoral Scholar at the University of Calgary where her research focuses on understanding youth psychosocial development and mental health issues from cultural (processes in family, school, and society) and cross-cultural (experiences of migration and immigration) perspectives. She is the author of *Competition and Compassion in Chinese Secondary Education* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015). Her work has also been published in academic journals such as *Youth & Society* and *Journal of Research on Adolescence* as well as the US national newspaper *Education Week*. She earned her doctorate in *Human Development & Psychology* from Harvard University.

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