

The Double Reduction Policy: A Counter-effective Effort to Reduce the Pressure on China's Involution Generation

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Abstract: In July 2021 the Chinese government implemented the Double Reduction Policy which aims to reduce the burden of excessive homework and after-school tutoring on students at the compulsory education level. However, the policy does not seem to have positive effects but rather increases the pressure and anxiety of students and their parents as the policymakers failed to consider the social problem of involution in China. While it is widely believed by Chinese people that a university education is an essential life task and is closely associated with socioeconomic development, students work hard in order to perform well in The High School Entrance Examination (Zhongkao) and The National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao), however, the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy hinders them from 'working hard'.

Keywords: the Double Reduction Policy, academic burden, after-school tutoring, involution, educational ideology

1. Introduction

On 24 July 2021, The General Office of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party and The General Office of State Council jointly issued the Double Reduction Policy which aims to reduce the burden of excessive schoolwork and after-school tutoring on primary and secondary students (i.e. students in compulsory education) and enhance their wellbeing [1]. The policy stipulates that the amount of time students commit to homework must be reduced to 1.5 hours and places a particular emphasis on the regulation and standardization of private tutoring. However, despite its implementation, the well-being of students has not been improved as the policymakers failed to take into consideration the practical difficulties involved [2]. There has been wide criticism that the pressure on students and the anxiety of parents will never be reduced if the hyper-competitive education system is not reformed [3].

Studies on the Double Reduction Policy are scarce. Existing literature analyzed the policy mainly from the perspectives of schools, teachers and policymakers [2], whereas few focused on the experience of students. To address this literature gap, this article will first examine the reasons behind the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, and then evaluate the effectiveness of the policy in lessening students' academic pressure in relation to the social, economic and cultural contexts of China.

2. The Purposes of the Double Reduction Policy

2.1. Alleviating Academic Burden and Improving Mental Health

The mental health situation of Chinese students is worrying. According to the Report on National Health Development in China (2019-2020) [4], 24.6% of Chinese adolescents have depression disorders, with 7.4% of them having major depressive disorders. Moreover, studies have shown that there has been a decreasing trend in the age of onset of mental disorders in China in recent years [5]. Therefore, awareness must be raised of the urgent need for the protection of the mental health of secondary and primary school students, especially the former, as adolescent depressive symptoms are strongly predictive of major depression in adulthood as well as later emotional, personality and cognitive deficits [6].

One of the most significant sources of stress for primary and secondary school students in China is the heavy academic burden. Compared to students in Western countries, Chinese students are faced with much more fierce academic competition and higher expectations and demands of parents [7], especially in the era of involution (*neijuan* in Chinese, a phenomenon of irrational and unnecessary competition where everyone is investing excessive effort in order to gain a positional advantage, but the chance of success is little), they have to spend an overwhelming amount of time and energy on studying in order to get high scores and outperform their competitors in the *Zhongkao*. According to the Report on National Health Development in China (2019-2020), sleep deprivation is common among children and teenagers, with 95.5% of primary school students sleeping less than ten hours a day, and 90.8% of secondary school students sleeping less than nine hours a day [4]. Many students not only have to complete a large amount of schoolwork but also have to do the homework from after-school training classes [8]. Hence, the Double Reduction Policy was introduced to reduce the burden on students and would be beneficial to student's physical and psychological health.

2.2. Regulating and Standardizing After-school Tutoring Activities

Since the neoliberal reform in the education sector, the off-campus tutoring industry had been booming in China [9]. However, its operation was in the grey area because of the loose government control [10]. While the marketization and privatization of education offered students rich high-quality educational resources outside schools, some problems emerged.

Firstly, the rapid development of the off-campus tutoring industry intensified academic involution and violated the principle of educational equity advocated in the socialist society of China [10]. While extra tutoring became a 'must' rather than a 'plus', parents had to keep investing heavily in off-campus education in order to ensure that their children would not fall behind, which caused a great economic burden and psychological stress on families. In the meantime, the expansion of off-campus tutoring increased educational inequality as students from higher socioeconomic statuses could enjoy better but more expensive out-school education and were more likely to achieve higher scores than their counterparts from lower socioeconomic statuses. This was very disadvantageous to students from rural areas or poor working-class families as they did not have access to supplementary education and the only way they could get into good high schools was through hard work.

Secondly, the massification of off-campus tutoring commodified education which is supposed to be a social service and caused corruption among teachers [9]. Though teaching is a socially respected and stable profession, it is relatively poorly paid compared to many lucrative jobs in the market economy [9]. Under the economic pressures of urban society, many public-school teachers worked part-time in off-campus training agencies or ran their own classes to earn extra income, which is illegal [11]. Hence, this might lead to corruption as teachers might teach less content at schools in order to force students to receive extra tutoring [9].

Therefore, the Double Reduction Policy would help to alleviate education involution, create a fairer competing environment for poor students and lessen families' financial burdens caused by high expenditures on children's learning.

3. Ineffectiveness of the Policy

3.1. The Unchanged Hyper-Competitive Examination System in China

While evaluating the effectiveness of an educational policy targeting a specific student population, it is crucial to consider the operation of the nation's whole education system and the broader social context. For millions of students in China, entering university is the final goal for many years of academic endeavours, but only a part of them can achieve it. To get into universities, students have to undergo two brutal selection processes: the Zhongkao and the Gaokao. Zhongkao which takes place at the end of grade nine is regarded as the most important watershed in life as it determines whether a student could go to a high school, which in turn determines whether a student could go to a university. Among all the students receiving compulsory education, only about half of them could enter normal high schools and the other half would go to vocational high schools [12]. Among all the normal high school graduates, only about 40 per cent of them could go to universities, and the rest would be enrolled in vocational undergraduate colleges and specialized colleges [12].

Although the admission quota for universities has been continuously increased by the expansion of higher education since the late 1990s [13], Gaokao has remained highly competitive due to the stratification of universities. The purpose of higher education stratification is to concentrate the highest-quality educational resources in top-tier public universities which are responsible for cultivating talents for the knowledge economy of the country [13]. In the meantime, low-tier private (Minban) universities address the need of sustaining higher education massification and absorbing increased enrollment [13].

Competition for admissions to top-tier universities is extremely intensive. Among all the high school graduates eligible for university education, about only 18 percent could be enrolled in first-tier universities, 4.7 percent are able to enter 211 universities, and 1.7 percent are able to enter 985 universities (statistics in 2020) [14]. Enrollment rates vary substantially across provinces due to different enrollment score lines, socioeconomic differences and unequal geographic distribution of high-quality educational resources and first-tier universities. Beijing with the easiest college entrance exam, the greatest number of first-tier universities, the least total number of examinees (492,000) and the highest first-tier university enrollment rate (48.8%) ranks as the easiest province to take Gaokao [14]. Tianjin and Shanghai rank below Beijing. Henan with the greatest total number of examinees (1,156,000) and the lowest first-tier university enrollment rate (13.6%) is known to be the 'Gaokao hell' [14]. The significant inequality in opportunities for access to top universities between students from different provinces determines that those from disadvantaged regions must study much harder than their counterparts from advantaged regions to win the competition.

In order to be well prepared for the Gaokao, hundreds and thousands of students start to participate in the involution at very young ages. Children in grade one or two are sent to after-school training classes to receive early education as their parents do not want them to lose at the starting line [15]. Secondary school students spend an overwhelming amount of time and energy on studying in order to perform well in the Zhongkao to get into key high schools which ensure scores on the Gaokao that enable university admission. Thus, the Double Reduction Policy in fact only reduces the academic burden on students who do not care about their academic outcomes and mostly will end up entering vocational high schools. However, the policy does not reduce but rather increases the pressure and anxiety of the majority of students who study hard in order to get high scores on the Zhongkao,

because the underlying radical social issue of intense competition for scarce higher education resources in China has not been addressed.

While the mainstream media coverage of the effect of the Double Reduction Policy has been largely positive [16, 17], Chinese netizens have complained a lot about the problematic nature of the policy on social media platforms. On Zhihu which is an online forum where people can post queries and answers and discuss topical issues, there is a popular topic: why students are feeling more exhausted after the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy? Users commented that, “I have not seen any signs of change”, “without decreasing the difficulty of Zhongkao and increasing the high school enrollment, the academic burden on students will never be lifted”; “the amount of homework even increases and school finishes later”; “Double Reduction actually means a reduction in leisure and entertainment time”, “two minuses make a plus”; “with the crackdown of big off-campus tutoring institutions like Xueersi and New Oriental which provided professional and affordable education, parents now have to pay double or even triple prices for extra tutoring, and what is more ridiculous is that students have to attend classes secretly at tutors’ homes, warehouses or basements”. Therefore, without the reform of the competition mechanism, the Double Reduction policy is just an unrealistic attempt to decrease stress and improve the well-being of students, and it essentially has the reverse effect [18].

3.2. Chinese People’s Deep-rooted Educational Desire — From Historical and Cultural Perspectives

3.2.1. From the Imperial Examination to the Gaokao

It is commonly believed by Chinese people that entering a first-tier university is the path to a well-paid white-collar job, though this conception has been challenged nowadays. The practice of excelling in Gaokao and later achieving a successful life has its historical origin in the Sui dynasty. In order to select competent officials to facilitate national development and the centralization of state power, the Emperor Wen of Sui formulated the Imperial Examination system. Operating on the principle that the selection of officials must be based on intellectual ability rather than on birth, the system allowed people from poor families, remote and rural areas and offspring of merchants who were at the bottom of social hierarchies in ancient China to compete equally with people from the upper class, whereas before the Sui dynasty official positions were monopolized by aristocrats and royalty. The Imperial Examination system produced social mobility. It was commented by Sun Zhongshan as a milestone in Chinese history and a prominent contribution China made to the civilization of the world [19]. The system was adopted in the subsequent dynasties and reached its climax of rigidity and complexity in the Qing dynasty [20]. Candidates had to write formulaic eight-legged essays (*baguwen* in Chinese) based on the content of Four Books and Five Classics of Confucianism, and if they wrote in a creative way they would be degraded. This repressive examination system was widely criticized by progressive thinkers for wasting educational investment and talented people and was finally abolished by Emperor Guangxu in 1905 [20].

In 1952, three years after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, the Gaokao was introduced. Sharing the commonality of centralized and equal nature with the Imperial Examination, Gaokao selected a very small portion of elite students nationwide to receive free higher education. University students were guaranteed stable jobs assigned by the government after graduation and enjoyed the benefits of financial subsidies and *hukou* (household registration) transfer from rural to urban areas [21, 22]. However, this policy was unsustainable regarding the limited national budgets and the increasing demand for highly educated people for socialist construction [21].

After the end of the Mao era (1976), a shift towards market orientation occurred in the higher education sector following the introduction of the Reform and Opening-up policy (1978) by the

neoliberal Deng Xiaoping government [13]. A user-pay system was implemented and universities with diverse funding streams began to be established alongside public universities [21]. Meanwhile, with the decentralization of state power, regional governments were authorized to run universities [21]. Since the 1980s, higher education has kept on expanding and after 1999 China entered the stage of mass higher education [13]. In 2000 the Chinese government announced that the state would no longer assign jobs to graduates, which aimed to offer freedom of employment choice to the growing number of university graduates and to increase employment mobility [23].

Under the new policy, students who graduated from 211/985 were much more likely to get good jobs compared to students who graduated from lower-tier universities. Therefore, success in the Gaokao was deemed as the key to a successful career. For decades, Chinese students have been striving for academic excellence and the implementation of the Double Reduction Policy can be regarded as ‘impeding their personal success’.

3.2.2. The Changed Employment Situation and the Unchanged Educational Ideology

Due to the massive number of university graduates produced by the expanded higher education system, the job market competition has become increasingly fierce, especially in recent years when the employment situation has deteriorated since the economic growth of China has reached a plateau and the protracted impact of Covid-19 has caused significant financial stress on many companies [24]. Credentialism has permeated the job market. Many enterprises only offer interview opportunities to job seekers who graduated from 211/985 universities or universities that rank within the top 50 to 100 on the QS list. Meanwhile, diplomas are inflated, with bachelor’s degree holders finding it more and more difficult to get satisfying jobs and even being unemployed as the increasing number of job seekers with master’s degrees has led to elevated entry requirements for many professions. As a consequence, bachelor’s degree holders are pouring into professions like early childhood education which were once dominated by people who graduated from specialized colleges or even vocational schools [25]. Such overeducation in the labor market is unnecessary and is a waste of higher education investment.

Facing the unpromising employment condition, university graduates have lowered expectations about their income and career prospects [26]. There is now a popular saying in China that “a monthly wage of 3000 RMB is not enough to recruit a migrant worker, but is definitely enough to recruit a university graduate” [26]. While the expanded higher education system is massively producing a cheap labor force, it leads us to question what is the meaning and function of the university if it fails to prepare students for the social and economic contexts.

The problem of higher education massification is that it allows students who were not eligible for university education before the expansion now to enter low-tier/Minban universities [27]. Under the poor-quality teaching of these universities, they would become incompetent workers after graduation, so it may be more suitable for these students to receive vocational education and then enter blue-collar or the corresponding professions.

However, despite the fact that the average wage of blue-collar workers has been increasing and has exceeded the wages of many low-income white-collar workers [28], Chinese people have a strong preference for academic education over vocational or technical education which is regarded to be inferior [29]. This is attributed to the profound influence of Confucianism which places a great emphasis on the acquisition of academic or theoretical knowledge [30]. Hence, although universities are losing remunerative value (except 985 universities), students are dedicated to pursuing higher education as an important task of life [31]. In addition, many parents (mostly post-80s) who had achieved socioeconomic success after succeeding in the Gaokao firmly believe that high educational attainments lead to a prosperous future. However, this may not hold true in the era of involution where there are limited opportunities for young university graduates and hard work may not pay off.

In conclusion, because of Chinese people's tenacious and historically deep-entrenched ideology that high educational achievements can translate into socioeconomic success, students will strive for high scores and the Double Reduction Policy aims at reducing academic pressure on them actually hinders them from 'achieving their goals'.

4. Conclusion

Despite its good purposes, the Double Reduction Policy is unfeasible as it lacks consideration of the social and cultural contexts of China. Because of Chinese people's deep-rooted belief that success in Zhongkao and Gaokao predicts socioeconomic achievements in later life, though this idea has been challenged under the involution, and because of Chinese people's strong adherence to university education, it is hard for students to give up participating in the fierce academic competitions. Also, without the change in the involuted education system and job market, the academic pressure on students will never be reduced.

This paper contributes to filling the literature gap in evaluating the effectiveness of the Double Reduction Policy in lessening the academic burden on students. As there has not been empirical research into this topic, future studies may investigate students' experiences after the implementation of the policy by conducting interviews or surveys.

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