

The Evolution of Shadow Education in China and Criticism of Reasons Behind It

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Abstract: This review clustered the papers investigating shadow education in China from the emergence stage (the 1980s) to the industrialized stage (1980s - 2000s), and capitalized stage (2000s afterward). The “Reform and opening-up” policy in 1978 was conducted to improve individuals’ unemployment firstly but brought more negative issues related to wealth disparity, education essence, and tutoring quality. Since 2016, many restrictions were performed to control shadow education resulting in merely large tutoring corporations surviving similarly to the Covid-19 pandemic period. Shadow education could highly personalize customers’ needs and equalize educational opportunities by providing more services to minority groups. However, it may distort students’ emphasis on learning to educational return and enrich wealth disparity.

Keywords: exam culture, education, economy, policy

1. Introduction

Since the twenty centuries, shadow education has expanded significantly throughout the world. The names and definitions of shadow education vary based on different areas and languages [1]. In this article, private supplementary tutoring suggested by Bray [2] will be used for definition. For privateness, the tutoring offered by teachers as well as their professional commitments and duties will be exchanged for payment. For supplementation, the covered and excluded subjects in school will be tutored.

The studies of shadow education were initiated in the 1980s and Stevenson & Becker [3] commenced pioneering research on extracurricular tutoring activities. Based on the areas, researchers found that compared to the western countries, such as the United States and the United Kingdom, students in the East Asian countries and regions including China, Korea, Japan, and Singapore demonstrate more preferences for tutors on academic subjects [4].

Shadow education in western countries has a long history but without enough attention, which has been embedded in their culture [4]. While in East Asian countries especially in South Korea, shadow education has undergone enormous changes. In the late 1960s, the South Korean government proceeded with paying attention to shadow education issues and banned it in the 1970s [5]. Then from 1981 to 1999, the prohibition policy of the South Korean government on shadow education entered a period of revision and supplementation [4]. Finally, shadow education has been legalized in South Korea since 2000.

In China, the evolution of shadow education of it is similar to the counterpart of South Korea to some extent. In this article, the literature review from the 1980s to nowadays will be clustered for the evolution history to analyze the reasons behind it. Also, their disadvantages and advantages of them will be discussed.

2. Analysis

Shadow education in China emerged under the policy framework. In the 1980s, the “reform and opening-up” policy was carried out by the government [6]. The new policy directed two essential developments of the education system which are the restoration of examinations and financial reforms [7-8].

In 1977, China’s National College Entrance Examination (NCEE) renewed the educational policy to transport qualified individuals to elevated standards of schools or universities by conducting examinations [9]. However, many students and families considered the examinations as the center of education shortly [9]. Meanwhile, You [10] reported that the egalitarian model was abandoned, and quality education was pursued by the government, which changed the financial structures of schools. Specifically, merely many principal schools were focused on funding and assistance [10], while certain schools were provided with lower budgets and resources [11].

These backgrounds boosted the emergence of shadow education in the 1980s. The renewed examination system provided social mobility with meritocratic methods [11], and it stimulated parents’ high expectations for their children’s success in examinations [12].

During the following decade, various forms of shadow education appeared across China. Individual-based home tutoring and school–organized tutoring classes became the popular forms of tutoring [9]. As Feng [9] argued that the later tutoring was more institutionalized because of the mobilization and collaboration of providing teachers of different subjects with payment tutoring. It was supported by Wu and Wang [13], as they debated that schools’ tutoring activities compensated teachers with salaries and satisfied parents’ demand for supplementary academic support, which was conducive. Nevertheless, according to many scholars, these activities may cross the line of professionalism and are potentially leading to corruption [14-16]. At the emergence stage, regulations on these activities were not sufficiently conducted and implemented.

Industrialized provision of shadow education in China continued from the late 1990s to the 2000s. From this fast-shifting stage of industrialization, the diminution of both individual-based tutoring at home or school and the increase of commercial tutoring corporations could be found [9].

Certain reasons underlay the change. Shadow education involved many mainstream teachers and raised the fairness challenges to education, which steadily gained policy attention [9]. Besides, the authorities from various positions regarded fee-paying tutoring as unethical and conducted prohibitions [17]. Under this circumstance of choosing between preserving their jobs and receiving extra payment, many teachers ceased their tutoring practices while a few became full-time tutors [9].

Another significant factor was the acceleration of examination culture in China. Data provided by Wan [18] demonstrated that, from 1998 to early 2004, Chinese university enrollments magnified over 400%. Initially, higher education expanded to relieve the instantaneous pressure of unemployment due to the 1997 financial crisis, but then provided more individuals with chances to compete in higher education [18].

During this period, the feature of the tutoring industry in China could be the separation of labor and more assimilated operation process in tutoring corporations [9]. Compared to the emergence stage before, the teaching materials were primarily decided by the teachers while in the merchandized tutorial centers, they emphasized examination preparedness and test-taking skills [19]. At this stage, several tutoring corporations led the forefront and became capitalized in the market ultimately.

Capitalization significantly changed China's tutoring industry. In the 2000s, several Chinese tutoring corporations successfully expanded hundreds of branches and attracted international investors [9]. In contrast with the tutoring corporations in Japan and South Korea, the Chinese counterpart would not be restricted by the domestic market respectively [20]. Therefore, Chinese tutoring centers developed rapidly with international capital and investment to reach a more globalized stage [9].

Additionally, it gradually exceeded certain boundaries of traditional tutoring. Conventionally, tutorial centers intimated mainstream schools for their operation and teaching, and the content of courses that they provided was restricted to many academic subjects [9]. In contrast, considerable tutorial chains maximized profitability by developing inclusive tutoring provisions provided by various departments within the same corporation [21]. For example, many tutoring services such as arts, music, and programming, have developed transcendently the range of mainstream schooling, which blurred the scopes of tutoring [21].

At the capitalized stage, the geographical boundaries of the tutoring industry were crossed. The factors could be the clone of tutoring centers via chained or franchised conduct, and the tutoring instructions via new technologies [9]. In China, online tutoring could mean means that teachers could utilize the internet for tutoring students at different locations simultaneously is increasingly common.

Under this situation, top tutoring corporations evolved into new power in the capital market and were ready for market recessions [20]. In 2016, many tighten restrictions were performed to regulate the materials, period, venues, and eligibility in the tutoring industry [22]. These restrictions negatively influenced many private tutoring centers, but the larger capitalized corporations have undertaken fewer damages due to their stronger compliance capabilities [22].

Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic period also remarked that the larger capitalized corporations with stabilized finance and qualified online platforms could subsist from the health and economic crises. As China Association for Non-government Education noted [23], in-person classes had to be suspended by the whole tutoring industry because the Chinese government implemented social distancing orders and online tutoring was forced to be switched.

In 2021, the Double Reduction Policy was implemented comprehensively to relieve the excessive burden of intramural homework and supplementary tutoring for primary and high school students [24]. Burden of intramural homework is categorized by Ma & Yang [25] as curriculum and homework, cogitation and understanding, as well as examination and ranking. Arguably, Zhou & Qi [23] considered homework as the core burden of academic load. As they concluded from the questionnaire data collected from 30 thousand Beijing primary students, the Excessive Assignment Strategy which attempts to reach ideal grades with overload homework practices fails to improve students' learning effectiveness and learning quality.

Meanwhile, intensive supplementary tutoring negatively occupies students' holidays and extracurricular time [23], Double Reduction Policy aims to provide primary and high students with more time spent with physical exercise, labor living, and habit establishment [23].

Under this circumstance, the Double Reduction Policy focuses on standardizing supplementary tutoring, enhancing intramural teaching quality, and supplying after-class services [26-28]. Notably, after-class services could potentially address the “

Three-Thirty” issue, which means increasing requirements for dual-career families to take care of their children after school. However, the operational specifications, service contents, arrangement for teachers' involvement, and cooperation among families, schools as well as societies should be coped with within this new policy [23].

Especially, China still conducts pandemic lockdowns nowadays. According to Fu et al. [29], online supplementary tutoring centers were developing rapidly during the Covid-19 epidemic period,

earning over 50 billion RMB. Confronted with the bursting need for supplementary tutoring, the market supervision system requires conducting a powerful restraint.

Throughout the history of the development of shadow education in China over the past four decades, the complexity behind it could be explained by cultural, educational, economic, and political reasons. From the perspective of culture, it could be traced back to Confucius culture which considers education undertakes an essential role in social development [30]. Besides, Chinese parental values in education were influenced by the Imperial

Examination System (i.e., select talents by examination started Sui Dynasty in China). Unavoidably, culture and examination-based systems positively boost parental desires for more and higher quality educational resources. After many Chinese citizens were satisfied with the basic living, they started paying more attention to investment in education. Linking to the economic reasons, investing in student education via supplementary tutoring optimistically correlates with the human capital of the students [30]. Specifically, engaging in supplementary tutoring raise the possibility for students to reach higher academic performance and maintain or improve their social status in return.

Viewing China's shadow education from the first three perspectives could be a double-edged sword. In pursuit of the best education, individual students' academic needs are highly personalized [31]. As Bray [32] evidentially pointed out, supplementary tutoring companies have to satisfy consumer needs, they would find them out and effectively respond to them. For example, one-to-one tutoring is a high level of consumer-oriented, need-based, and personalized teaching and learning [33]. If students could not keep up with the knowledge of a certain subject in school, then a one-to-one tutor could teach them in a targeted manner. However, this could also result in less attention in mainstream schools and more dependence on after-class tutoring, which is relatively less found in existing research.

From the perspective of allocating educational resources, shadow education may equalize educational opportunity by providing extra support to disadvantaged children [34-35]. For instance, tutoring could spend more time scaffolding students with intellectual disabilities based on their understanding in contrast with the teachers in mainstream schools, who are more required to take the overall situation into consideration.

On the contrary, the desire for optimal education may cause over-orienting toward students' academic success. In a short term, students are taught test-taking skills to prepare for the examination and reach better academic performance [36]. In a long term, students could lose their interest in studying and suffer from well-being issues from high pressure [30].

Furthermore, shadow education could enrich the disparity in wealth distribution. Similar to the survival tutoring corporations in China, wealthy families utilize their accumulated resources to stabilize or improve their social status through educational investment, while the disadvantaged family could not afford the tuition [30-31]. In return, educated individuals could obtain more human capital and then invest more in education for the next generations, resulting in more societal imbalance.

From the perspective of politics, China owns a late start to the supplementary tutoring industry and its governance. Especially during the Covid-19 period, regulatory mechanisms are more difficult to detect tutors engaging in more private and expensive class teaching [23]. Drawing on the shadow education management of countries such as South Korea and Japan, China has explored its management model based on its national conditions. From the encouragement of tutoring when the college entrance examination system was established, to the Double Reduction Policy in recent years, shadow education would eventually return to moderate policy control.

3. Conclusion

In conclusion, the emergence of shadow education in China represented the restoration of examinations and financial reforms in the 1980s. Then in the late 1990s, shadow education enters the stage of industrialization. Within this stage, wealth resources were accumulated, and society surged in demand for education, resulting in a few tutoring companies succeeding and becoming the new force in the capital market. Generally, the Chinese government realized that uncontrolled supplementary tutoring would negatively trigger certain issues, such as occupying students' spare time and enriching disparity in wealth distribution. Therefore, they conduct the Double Reduction Policy to tighten restrictions. Relying on solid accumulation, leading supplementary tutoring corporations have survived the tightening of policies and the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cultural, educational, economic, and political conditions intertwined and contributed to the evolution of shadow education in China. Although certain advantages could be equalizing education opportunities by providing additional resources to disadvantaged students and meeting the highly personalized academic needs of students. The opposite sides could be the acceleration of parental desire for improved academic performance for their children, and the imbalance of homework load and psychological stress. All in all, China should consider both sides of shadow education and combines its own national condition, to develop an improved educational climate.

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