

Preface

China has developed more rapidly than any other place in the world over the last two decades. In the 1980s the transformation began from a predominantly rural and peasant society to one where the majority will soon be urban dwellers, many of whom are now living a middle-income life fully integrated into mass consumption and an industrialised society. Alongside rapid social and economic changes in the education system has evolved.

This research monograph charts how change has taken place in three contrasting areas. The first Tongzhou is rich and urban and close to Beijing. In 1990 it was one of the richest 300 counties but still had a rural character in many parts and some small-scale industries. Now Tongzhou is a modern city with multi-lane highways and many commuters living in high rise apartments, and much inward migration from the countryside driven by employment opportunities generated in special development zones. Ansai has been transformed by the exploitation of oil under the Loess Plateau. Its infrastructure has modernised and new roads and railway lines mean that villages that were remote are accessible. At the same time there has been both urbanisation and outward migration so the rural population has shrunk fast. In Zhaojue there has been some development around the main road onto the high plateau and new villages and schools are being built to encourage Yi people to move off the mountains. But most schools remain small and difficult to access, and some are in very poor condition.

The study illustrates many things. Over a generation some districts that were relatively poor have become relatively rich. The numbers of small and incomplete schools in two of the areas have fallen dramatically. The total number of children enrolled has also fallen steeply as a result of much lower birth rates and in some counties because of outward migration. The old system of pushing the financial burden of compulsory basic education down to the local level with a series of local taxes has collapsed and been replaced by more centralised funding. Inequalities have grown as development has been uneven between areas. And though most children go to school, and in richer areas almost all complete grade 9, it remains the case that in the least developed districts as many as a third probably do not

graduate successfully from lower secondary. Amongst these are a disproportionate numbers of girls, HIV orphans, and members of national minorities. The biggest single issue that emerges is of the need to rebalance horizontal and vertical equity so that all children have more similar chances of participating, learning and progressing to higher levels of the school system.

Keith Lewin
Director of CREATE
Centre for International Education
University of Sussex

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Wang, L.; Lewin, K.

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