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Governing educational desire. Culture, politics and schooling in China

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Reviews (I)

Kipnis, Andrew B. (2011). *Governing Educational Desire. Culture, Politics and Schooling in China*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. ISBN: 978-0-226-43753-8.

In this book Kipnis tries to delve into the determinants of the educational desire as a Chinese society's feature that would explain dedication, sacrifice and academic success of teachers, families and students in China. Studying this phenomenon would allow understanding why and how a family is able to save 13.000 RMB for University fees while an average adult only earns 10.000 RMB a year. To explain it, the author highlights the role of some cultural, historic and social factors as exemplariness, exams, holistic hierarchy, literary masculinity and nation building. To delve into educational desire he analyzes the Chinese educative system through a laudable historical and cultural contextualization, and by means of a ten year's Zouping ethnography, a county of the north-oriental Shandong province, that is valuable and whose example can be extrapolated to the whole country. Doing this the author shows a wide knowledge about the ins and outs constituting the political system, the educative system and the Chinese society. Likewise, the ethnography is a deep qualitative analysis that allows him to give voice and face to subjects, to actors and to their experiences, desires and problems.

One of the positive aspects in this book is the dual analysis that takes into account both the systemic elements and the human agency. Among the systemic elements it highlights the economic and educative policies, as

investments in Education -by means of which China achieved in 2006 the literacy of 90% adults over 45 years old or school attendance of 90% children 3 to 6, 90% students 17 to 18 and 65% students attending University, while the 75% left attending vocational schools-, or as cultural and historic elements linked to values as exemplariness, exams to avoid corruption and nepotism, guarantee quality and meritocracy, holistic hierarchy, literary masculinity and family support. Regarding to human agency, it highlights, bottom-up, how governors, teachers, families and students deeply assimilated the educational desire, sacrificing themselves to achieve high educational levels and taking profit of the available opportunities, motivated by both an upward mobility aim and Confucian values. Academic success is a consequence of several systemic elements, but simultaneously a cause of systemic changes, as the fertility shrinking or changes in family's values and behaviors. The author points out some interesting factors that can only be highlighted from a subjects approach, as peasants rejecting Maoist educative system because it provoked their school failure and frustration, while they accept today's one because it provides to their offspring a way of upward mobility. Kipnis' holistic approach allows highlighting interesting issues from several disciplines, as some current educative system's pedagogical wise decisions as organizing heterogeneous classrooms mixing highs scoring and low scoring students, asking teachers to pay attention to the least advantaged in order to achieve everybody's success. Or highlighting sociological issues as the literary masculinity, consisting of an appeal towards male who values and pursues high educational levels, to explain why males also develop educational desire. Last but not least, the author carries out an effort of globalization of educational desire as described in Zouping and in China, by analyzing some of its constituent features -as a rapid and late industrialization, demographic transition, literary masculinity, nation building and exemplarity- that can also be found in other geographies and other historic contexts.

Some issues that the author foresight as worries for China in the future are the probable educational budget's decreasing, which would charge families with higher economic efforts, increasing educative inequalities between wealthy and poorer or rural families; the debate about the effectiveness of an authoritarian versus a democratic educative system, that he solves with a combination of memorization, exemplariness and discipline from the first, and a creative commitment from the second; and finally, the debate around the convenience of a vocational education, seen as fostering China manufacture industry's position and providing an alternative to students that failed attaining University.

Kipnis concludes the book by saying that deep changes in the described educative, cultural and social complex hardly will happen, because educational desire is deeply anchored in Chinese society. According to him, all the educative reforming waves coming from abroad -Russia, Europe, Japan, and so on- only forced to adopt the international rhetoric in the local debates, but did not modify the ideas introduced by Dewey in 1920's. Education is an extremely competitive exam-based system. Even a democratic revolution moving the Communist Party from power would provoke some changes in the curriculum, but would not modify the educative system's nature, which is embedded in institutions, bureaucracy, values, economy or demographic dynamics.

Overall, the reader can find an interesting analysis, that relies on both a deep knowledge of Chinese history, culture and society, and an ethnography that gathered the educational desire of the principal actor's voices during more than ten years.

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