

An Analysis of the Double Reduction Policy: Structural Incentives, Academic Pressure, and the Persistence of Shadow Education

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Abstract: This paper studies China's Double Reduction Policy and its limits. Before 2021, shadow education grew very fast. Low teacher pay, weak school autonomy, and strong exam pressure created a large space for private tutoring. Families worried that their children would fall behind, so they spent more time and money on after-school classes. The policy aimed to cut homework and reduce off-campus tutoring. After it was introduced, some big tutoring companies closed or changed their business. At the same time, many smaller and hidden forms of tutoring appeared. Survey evidence shows that gaps between rich and poor families in tutoring and study time remained large, and in some cases even grew. The paper links these outcomes to teacher incentives, local fiscal constraints, and deep cultural beliefs about exams, merit, and education. It argues that regulation alone cannot ease student stress or reduce educational inequality without broader structural and cultural change.

Keywords: Double Reduction Policy; Teacher incentives; Academic pressure; Educational inequality; Parental anxiety; Confucian cultural persistence; Private tutoring market; China's education system

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1. Introduction

The Double Reduction Policy was launched by the General Office of the CPC Central Committee and the General Office of the State Council on July 24th, 2021. The main concern of this policy was to ease the burden of excessive homework and off-campus tutoring for students undergoing compulsory education^[1]. In practice, it manipulates numerous Chinese educational tutoring institutions that have been formed for several years, which are often considered routine. The implementation happened intensely and seriously with a strong depression on traditional profitable extracurricular educational tutoring^[2]. The strict requirements from the government have asked all educational tutoring institutions can be no longer profitable, and every procedure in teaching is systematically planned, even the timeline when they can teach students has shrunk from all day long to only on some non-holiday days. Educational policies that have been set up in China after roughly 1980 when after

the Reform and Opening Up Policy, a vital turning point in modern China, stressed the importance of a leading organization in management centrally (or local government management) and encourage educational innovation including curriculum development, teacher training, and resource allocation from central to local, including further administration and economical aspects, such as the distribution on teachers' salaries. This paper explains and exemplifies the effectiveness of the Double Reduction Policy.

2. Background: Why shadow education became explosive before the Double Reduction Policy

2.1. Structural problems in China's public education system (teacher side)

Before the Double Reduction Policy, the rapid expansion of shadow education in China was deeply rooted in the structural deficiencies of the public education system, particularly the chronic underfunding of teacher salaries and the administrative constraints placed on schools. To strengthen the role of teachers in education to achieve an advanced national education system, there came a strong need to promote teachers' salaries as well as the social welfare security systems for them. Mr. Xia Chengfeng, a prominent educator in the ROC mainland period, proposed ^[1]: "The issue of teachers' remuneration is not only an educational problem but also a social one." Which means a broad, serious, and fundamental issue would be elicited by a seemingly small, indifferent, and individual problem—teachers' remuneration, or to say, the welfare guarantee of pedagogues.

After-school tutoring has become widespread in modern China; that is, its opportunities stem from challenges within the country's public education system as well as broader societal shifts. One central factor was the system's inability, especially in past decades, to adequately reward teachers, considering the nation's booming private economy ^[2]. As income disparities rose between public and private sectors during the heady years of market reforms, dedicated instructors struggled to make ends meet on meager public compensation. Faced with financial hardship, some pedagogues reluctantly took part-time jobs to supplement their earnings. Simultaneously, anxious parents were asking for supplemental learning opportunities to give their children an edge in an increasingly competitive landscape ^[3]. Numerous factors helped cause a robust industry focused on after-school tutoring. Though controversial, the persistence of this phenomenon underlines structural issues that remain as China progresses toward a more equitable and prosperous future.

The most serious problem in the Chinese education system was the barriers engendered by the massive governmental bureaucracy that urgently needed to be resolved after 1980, though some inner problems were chronic. Despite the homogeneity in transparent and obscure expression of Chinese official documents, many of them still provoke discussions of the bureaucratic government engagement in the education system that should be autonomous ^[4]. In practice, this means that schools—especially in poor or remote areas—have little autonomy over hiring, budgets, or curriculum. The salary for teachers was too low to sustain their aspiration for a better life, and failed to face the rapidly growing living costs with the expanding private economy. Tsang noted that teacher compensation in China was chronically underfunded, especially in rural areas, resulting in "serious shortages of qualified teachers" and high turnover ^[5].

The management system further exacerbated inequalities through poor fiscal responsibilities: local governments, often constrained by limited revenues, delayed salary payments, or relied heavily on temporary contract teachers who earned substantially less than their peers ^[6]. Another problem in Chinese education is the presence of some untrained teachers with relatively lower diplomas contracted with schools, and being paid with low salaries (often one-fifth the salary of regular teachers in China), mainly happening in some Western provinces. These underpaid teachers were the majority of fee-based shadow education providers, according to

Bray [7]. It seems that free market demand promised higher returns, incentivizing more ambitious teachers into a legal but an edged zone that accounts for the most unwanted thing the government wants to see. What is more, the method of implementing policies often runs counter to the goals. For example, many teachers have been punished because they were accused of making salaries off campus, which further undermines the financial stability of some teachers, thereby they more likely to participate in shadow education, even though they knew this was risky. If policies in governing shadow education neglect economic incentives for teachers, it will lead to teachers relying more deeply on the after-school tutoring market. Some Chinese scholars, Li, have pointed out that in the implementation of the Double Reduction policy, more administrative penalties have been adopted, but the treatment of teachers has not been improved simultaneously. As a result, a contradiction has emerged where teachers “passively rely on external income” after the policy is implemented [8].

2.2. Increasing academic pressure and parental anxiety (student side)

At the same time, intense academic competition and rising parental anxiety further fueled the demand for private tutoring, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of pressure. Before the implementation of the “Double Reduction” policy, mental health problems such as depression and anxiety were widespread among Chinese primary and secondary school students. Prior to 2021, approximately 26% of students in China were found to exhibit depressive symptoms in relevant analyses, and a similar 24% showed elevated levels of anxiety [9]. In addition, 17.5% of children and adolescents aged 6–16 had at some point been diagnosed with a mental disorder [10]. Beyond national-level analyses, survey evidence from western Chinese cities is equally concerning: among a sample of 60,000 students, about 23% reported depressive symptoms and 13.9% reported symptoms of anxiety [11]. It is worth noting that the prevalence of depressive symptoms increases from 2% in early adolescence to around 18% in late adolescence, revealing a trend in which negative psychological symptoms grow more common with age. This implies that as students move from junior to senior secondary school, their experiences of depression may become progressively intensified. The accumulation of such psychological pressure is not merely a transient emotional state but is closely tied to long-term academic burden—specifically, whether students can withstand the entire learning cycle from entering junior secondary school to completing the college entrance examination [12]. This kind of chronic overload has been shown to be associated with multiple subtle health problems, such as sleep disorders [13].

3. Effects of the Double Reduction Policy

The Double Reduction policy has had a substantial impact on off-campus tutoring institutions, students, and teachers alike. Following its implementation, tutoring providers faced unprecedented challenges. For example, “Giant Education,” a well-known institution in northern China, closed down in 2021 [14], and another leading institution, New Oriental, announced that its parent company would shift its core business toward livestream e-commerce rather than off-campus tutoring [15]. Using Dazhong Dianping data from 2020 to 2022, researchers find that after the policy took effect, the share of students participating in off-campus language tutoring declined significantly, while participation in sports-related training rose markedly; they further argue that changes in the number of tutoring institutions are the main driver of shifts in participation rates. Nevertheless, even though the policy was intended to reduce students’ learning burden, participation in subject-based off-campus tutoring has still increased rather than showing a clear downward trend over time [16].

In the early stage of the Double Reduction policy, the number and size of off-campus tutoring

institutions declined markedly. However, because the demand for supplementary tutoring among students and parents persisted, a supply–demand mismatch emerged. Many providers shifted to smaller and more concealed forms of instruction, with quality that is difficult to guarantee, making supervision more challenging and fees higher^[17]. One-on-one, in-person subject tutoring conducted in students' homes is particularly difficult to detect^[18]. Consequently, educational inequalities between families with different income levels have further widened. Survey data indicate that even after the policy came into effect, 6.4% of students still participated in one-on-one, in-person subject tutoring, 8.2% took part in one-on-one online tutoring, and 3.1% received “home-tutor-style” instruction^[19].

In conclusion, in the interval between 2008 and 2018, when the Double Reduction Policy was carried out, the possibility of students with low family income (family economic status below 10%) passing the high school entrance examination decreased 9.3%; however, students from richer families who were not the implementation objects in gaining benefits rose by 5.3%. In the aspect of inputs, there comes a shocking differentiation: poorer families' inputs in education lowered 21%, on the contrary, richer families rose their inputs by 66%; time spent studying for students from poorer families was 9.19 hours, but for students from richer families, this number rose to 10.37, on average^[20].

4. The reasons for the failure of the Double Reduction Policy: Chinese permanent pursuit of education and its historical source

Preaching people to be honest, diligent, and obliged on assuming responsibilities, Confucianism became the only official ideology after the Han dynasty, offering a stereotype for people, both the royal family and ordinary people. This cultural hallmark still influences people nowadays. According to a national survey conducted in September 2021, 84.1% of parents believe that “comprehensive and good education for children is the most effective means to cope with fierce social competition in the future,” and “whether children can attend good primary or secondary schools is very crucial to their development” (82.1%). Therefore, “Parents need to do everything possible to provide the most favorable conditions for their children, at least not worse than most other children” (54.6%)^[21]. Chinese permanent pursuit of education was only a branch of externalization of this massive idealistic model, just like a computer program capable of dealing with most things which installed in people's minds instead of non-life electronic devices. Even after a tendency of abandonment of Confucianism in Chinese modern history, when people started reconsidering it when suffering: “Western powers pounded open China's door with their ‘solid ships and effective cannons’”^[22], it still plays an indispensable role.

The effect of Confucianism in education beliefs was not through bearded teaching on campus derived from traditional culture rehabilitation, but mostly through oral preaching and emphasis on rules domestically. For instance, most Chinese parents would teach their kids to be a good boy or girl who studies hard and restlessly and never plays video games or has an experience of romance, which is not possible but a model to push their kids to be. “The family is the principal context in which human development takes place.” The inheriting of Confucianism and its rule within education seems not being correspond with our shallow hypothesis which put into effect by orthodox methods, and the underpaying of it even still alive after the most drastic and detrimental disaster—The Cultural Revolution—probably the most cruel criticizing scholar, as the subsequent resumption of *Gaokao* (Chinese university entrance examination) just happened 1 year after the halt of it, also showcase indirectly Chinese reliance on exam-oriented education^[23]. Influenced by traditional cultural values, getting into a good university has become the only option, which explains why Chinese families choose to invest heavily

in their children's education. This is the fundamental reason why the demand for extracurricular tutoring will not change due to policy changes, because the double reduction policy has not altered the college entrance examination and the high school entrance examination.

5. Conclusion

Shadow education expanded in China because schools, teachers, and families faced strong and persistent pressure. Low teacher incomes, limited school resources, and intense exam competition pushed tutoring into everyday life long before the Double Reduction Policy appeared. These forces shaped the education system for decades and created habits that were difficult to change. The policy reduced the size of formal tutoring companies, yet many families continued to seek extra help in other ways. Hidden tutoring grew, and gaps between income groups remained clear. Wealthier families still had more access to private support, while poorer families had fewer options. As a result, the overall burden on students did not fall as much as expected. The root causes lie deeper than regulation. Teacher incentives, local fiscal limits, and long-standing cultural beliefs about examinations still define how families make decisions. As long as exam performance continues to determine educational opportunity, demand for tutoring will remain strong. Real progress will require broader changes in school funding, teacher pay, and the role of high-stakes exams—not only limits on the tutoring industry.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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