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## Berkeley Undergraduate Journal

### Title

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### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4c55p31g>

### Journal

Berkeley Undergraduate Journal, 24(2)

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### Publication Date

2011

### DOI

10.5070/B3242011679

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# The Ministry of Education or the Ministry of Truth?—Using Educational Content to Shape Ideology in China’s High Schools

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August 23, 2011

## Introduction

China is in the midst of one of the most dramatic social and economic transformations since the Industrial Revolution. The transformation that is harder to see, and perhaps much more difficult to accomplish, is the transformation of ideology. As a matter of fact, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has been trying to transform the nation’s ideology for the last few years. A striking example is the remodeling of the National Museum at Tiananmen in Beijing. After renovation, the distinctive red flags and stars near the roof disappeared, while a traditional Chinese roof decoration was added. And you see the giant statue of Confucius standing in the heart of China’s most symbolic place: Tiananmen Square (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Such contrast echoes the radical change in Confucianism education in the high school curriculum in China. In the pre-reform curriculum, Confucianism was described as an ideology of the past—a justification for imperial dynasties and feudal social relations. The post-reform curriculum describes it as an important part of Chinese culture and tradition that continues to have significance, and claims Confucius as “the greatest thinker and educationist” [20].

This is just a snapshot of the secondary education reform implemented by the Chinese central government between 2001 and 2011, *the* largest scale curriculum reform in the nation’s history. In this paper, I will argue that the Chinese government reforms the high school curriculum with the intention of reshaping students’ ideologies along three directions: more emphasis on humanities, more nationalist sentiment, and more trust towards the government.



**Fig. 1:** National Museum in 2000, before renovation. (Tiananmen Square, Beijing).



**Fig. 2:** National Museum in 2010, after renovation. (Tiananmen Square, Beijing).  
Pictures from <http://news.ccd.com.cn/Htmls/2011/1/13/201111385345103164-1.html> (Accessed 9/8/2011).

## Project Overview & Current Progress

This project consists of two stages. First, I examined the reformed textbooks and compared them with the historical versions, in order to identify the specific ideological changes that occurred in the new curriculum. These will help generate hypotheses for the empirical study. Second, I will implement empirical studies and use econometrics to measure students' ideological responses.

Over the summer, I spent six weeks in Beijing and Shanghai. I met with pro-

fessors at Peking and Tsinghua University, dug through library collections, and interviewed central government officials, local education ministers in Shanghai, as well as high school principals. Currently, I have concluded the first stage, and finalized the empirical study arrangements so that they will take place throughout the coming academic year.

During the rest of this paper, I will present what I have concluded about the ideological shifts embodied in the textbooks. I will then move into the empirical parts of the project, introducing the theoretical framework, justifications, and methodology, and then lay out the roadmaps for the empirical study.

First of all, let me briefly explain why I extended the first stage of the project, and why it is crucial to carefully examine all the textbooks. Since the founding of People's Republic of China, the Chinese government has the legacy of rarely stating their policy goals in an explicit manner. As a result, the language used in policy documents is often vague. A minor change in word choice or even punctuation marks might signify an important policy revision. This implies substantial difficulties for stage one (hypotheses generating). Although China's Ministry of Education was founded on a mission to shape students' ideology, its official documents contain no details on what specific aspects of ideology the curriculum intends to influence. Moreover, the subtlety in language extends to the textbook itself. The ideological shifts are sometimes manifested in understated manners, such as changes in paragraph structures and key expressions. Therefore, it takes significantly more effort than I originally expected to identify the specific ideological shifts and to predict responses from the students.

## Restructuring of Curriculum Composition

I first divided the reform of educational content into two components. On a macro level, the reform restructures the subject composition within the curriculum. It adds two new subjects (Art and Music), and reorganizes the class time allocation among the subjects. These changes center on the relationship between science and humanities. On a micro level, the reform changes the contents of existing textbooks, focusing on the conceptual theme of state, government, and national identity.

First, I examine the macro level changes: class-time allocation within the curriculum. Education scholars have argued that class time allocation signifies the high-positioned knowledge valued by a certain society. As you can see from the chart (Figure 3), after almost a century of disproportional emphasis on science, the reform marks the beginning of rebalancing towards subjects of the humanities. Conceptually, the new curriculum framework introduces the idea of "enhancing students' cultural and liberal arts attainments" [7]. This revival of humanities subjects challenges China's long-established ideological doctrine of Scientific Marxism.

Also, for the first time in almost a century, the subject of Chinese starts to regain its importance among the three core classes: Math, Chinese, and English. Under the new curriculum, Chinese catches up with Math for science-focused

students, and even becomes the most heavily weighted subject for humanities-focused students. More fundamentally, the subject of Chinese after the reform is no longer viewed as purely a communication tool. The new curriculum turns Chinese into a channel for delivering cultural and literary values, “in order to improve students’ liberal arts characteristics” [7].

## Textbook Content Changes

The reforms shifted the textbooks’ ideological rhetoric away from revolutionary communism and towards Chinese nationalism with strong historical and cultural roots. Previously, national unity was achieved through political homogeneity—a total grasp of Maoist communism. The new textbooks attempt to maintain such unity, but through nationalism manifested in both traditional cultural heritage and China’s uniqueness. As Henry Kissinger puts it, for centuries Chinese has maintained a belief in a single, universal and generally applicable truth as the standard of individual conduct and social cohesion [14]. What the new curriculum has done is to gradually replace the content of this truth: from Communism to Chinese traditional culture. For example, the Political Science curriculum adds a semester-long module specifically focused on culture. Also, the Chinese curriculum increases the ratio of Classical Chinese articles from 25% to 40%, the biggest addition since the founding of PRC.

The new textbooks also emphasize China’s uniqueness in order to establish nationalism. The History curriculum aims to “deepen students’ understanding in China’s specific situations” [7]. The curriculum’s core message is why China is unique today and has not followed general historical trends such as western democratic movements. In other words, the textbook uses China’s unique historical and cultural existence to justify the nation’s alternative development path. The message is very simple: China is so unique from the rest of the world that you should be proud of being a Chinese.

Since the earliest days of communist China, the nation and its government have been essentially one. The nation is manifested in its government, and the government comprehensively represents the nation. Consequently, the new curriculum establishes a stronger emphasis on the government itself to match the fortified nationalism.

For example, the Political Science textbook justifies why government should intervene in the market by adjusting how it introduces the market economy system. The previous textbook divides the chapter into three sections: a description of the characteristics of a Friedman-style market economic system, details about market failures, and an argument for the ultimate need for government intervention. However, the new textbook deletes the section about the conventional market economic system, and goes straight into market failures and government’s responsibility. This new structure stresses that a sustainable economic system absolutely needs government involvement. This would not only impact students’ view on market economy, but also strengthen their trust on the government’s macroeconomic policies. Furthermore, such emphasis on

government achievements in a modern economic setting would encourage students to participate in various political activities in the future, such as taking on civil service careers.

### **Empirical Study: Justification and Methodology**

For empirical studies, it is generally very difficult to separate education's influence from all the other socioeconomic variations that are affecting the students (such as families, media and major social shocks). This is probably why no rigorous study has ever been done regarding this topic. However, China's 8th Textbook Reformation during this past decade is unique. The adoption of the revised curriculum represents a natural quasi-experiment, an ideal setting to measure this causal effect of curriculum and students' ideology. Between 2004 and 2011, different Chinese provinces, in different years, introduced entirely new high school curricula for incoming high school students. Although introduced in various years, curricula in different provinces are highly akin. Moreover, these reforms were introduced sharply to the entering cohorts: students entering high school one year would have an entirely different three-year curriculum from that of students who entered high school just the year before.

Therefore, it becomes possible to use difference-in-differences (DID) for empirical econometrics measurements. I can compare cross-cohort differences in ideology in provinces where the reform was implemented (e.g. Jiangsu's class of 2008 to Jiangsu's class of 2007) to that of where the reform was not yet implemented (e.g. Tianjin's class of 2008 to Tianjin's class of 2007). This allows us to remove the confounding factors that are common to all provinces, independent of the curriculum reform. Because there were eight groups of provinces when new curriculum was introduced, one can make many such comparisons. Hence, I can reduce the likelihood of regional factors or specific timeframe to influence the measurement.

### **Empirical Study: Arrangements**

It is generally very difficult to obtain any official data from the Chinese government, especially on the national level. With my mentor's help, I managed to secure three empirical study arrangements.

1. Datasets from National and Jiangsu Education Ministry about students' Gaokao test, high school and college major choice, career choice, and civil service exam participation.

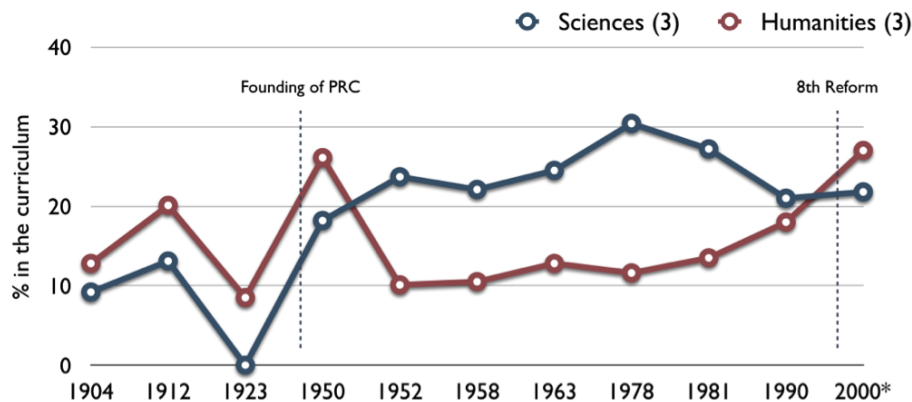
2. China Family Panel Study (CFPS), conducted by China Social Science Survey Center at Peking University.

3. Field study in Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou high schools in April 2012, with Stanford Professor Scott Rozelle's team and Center for Chinese Agricultural Policy at Chinese Academy of Sciences. (Possible content of the field study: dictator game, ultimatum game, public good game, and competitive game.)

## Significance and Implications

The content of education has important implications for the process of identity formation, the development of social norms, and the shaping of political preferences [1, 6, 8, 10, 17]. These, in turn, affect individuals' labor market choices and their expressions of political and economic preferences [3, 9]. Ultimately, shaping an individual's beliefs has implications for the development of the state (for example, through the recruitment of civil servants), while also having an impact on the choice and implementation of public policy as well as economic growth [5, 12, 15, 18, 19].

**Fig. 3:** High School Class Time Allocation. Adapted from [16].



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\* For 2000, use the average for science and humanities focused students.

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