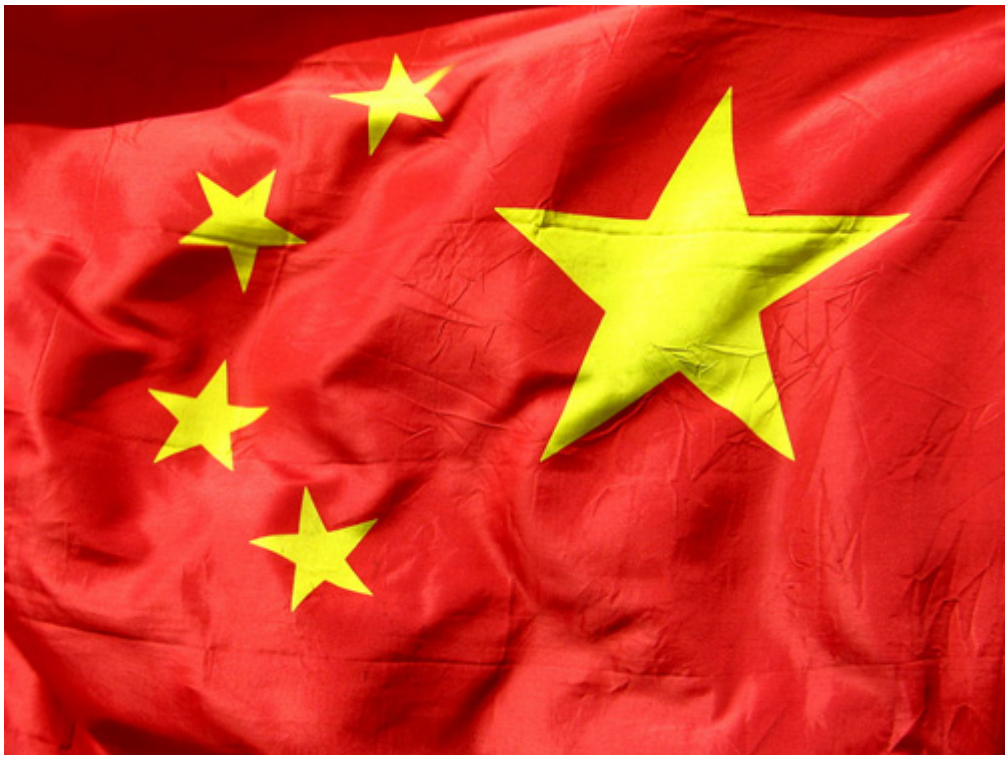
The Social Production of Hierarchy and What We Can Do about It.

Notes from Asia.

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Institutionalized education in most part of the human society seems intrinsically hierarchical. One is supposed to progress from a ‘lower’ level of learning to the ‘higher’; ‘average’ kids study in mediocre schools, and the ‘outstanding’ go to top colleges; and, finally, ‘degree’ is by definition hierarchical. Recent discussions on higher education have focused on the governmentalization/corporatization (roughly meaning tightened administrative management in order to make universities managerially accountable) and the marketization of universities. This essay explores the logic of hierarchy-making in a larger societal context. It is beyond dispute that established institutions have a deeply vested interest in maintaining exclusive and hierarchical systems, and it is also true that hierarchy, particularly in the form of the ranking tally, is imposed top-down by the establishment. However, we should not deny that educational hierarchy is also

widely recognized, respected and sometimes even celebrated by the larger society. Nor should we reduce the public acceptance to merely an example of false consciousness. Most people know much better than us (University nerds) how to deal with the world. There are ethical and moral dimensions to the socially produced hierarchy. Instead of aiming to eradicate hierarchy altogether (which cannot be a feasible agenda despite the ideological appeal), this post wishes to explore room in the social process of hierarchy-making that may enable realistic action agendas.

Precarious hierarchy and the ethics of hierarchy.

In the modern time in general, higher education becomes less exclusive, and educational hierarchy becomes much less absolute. In colonial Asia, for example, formal English education had such a magic power that it directly contributed to the creation of the institution of modern dowry in India. It is also safe to say that, in Asia at least, higher education becomes less hierarchical in the so-called neoliberal era[1]. China launched a new, unprecedented round of University expansion in 1998. The number of newly admitted students jumped from 1.08 million in 1998 to 2.5 million in 2001. By 2007, the planed intake reached 5.67 million! Similarly to Japan and South Korea, entering universities is no longer a crucial life event—it is not difficult to get in, and furthermore getting in does not guarantee good job prospects. Students have more freedom in choosing universities according to location, subject or campus ‘culture’ instead of a single system of hierarchical evaluation.

But hierarchy certainly does not go away. Universities become ever more concerned about hierarchical ranking. The Shanghai Jiao Tong University produces one of the best-known tallies in the world. This reflects the fact that previously fixed hierarchy is replaced by more dynamic and unstable differentiation. Hierarchy is in struggle. This also suggests that the process of hierarchy-making becomes more public, or social, than before, when it was declared by the state or established by tradition.

Underlying the new project of hierarchy-making in the higher education is an unmistakable capitalist logic. The higher the rank a university secures, the higher

the tuition fees it charges. But the opposite is untrue. In general, students cannot enter a high-rank university simply by paying more fees. There is a limit to capitalism. A curious example is the mushrooming mba courses in China. On the one hand, no other institutions are more conscious than the mba programs about the hierarchical ranking that directly determines the fees they charge. On the other hand, most of mba students, particularly those enrolled in the elite institutes in China, have work experiences, and many are self-employed, and thus the ranking does not mean much for them in the material sense (say, compared to other students who may need a strong University brand when looking for jobs). When I asked an entrepreneur (incidentally, a Taiwanese) why he applied for an expensive mba course in Shanghai, he gave me three reasons: good teachers, the reputation of the course (‘it sounds good’), and the opportunity to prove that, after working for many years, he is still able to pass tough examinations. The Chinese capitalist class in the making needs symbolic capital, but they need ‘solid’ symbolic capital, i.e., not a cheap, ‘ready for sale’ parody. The hierarchical ranking of universities undoubtedly facilitates exchange between financial and cultural capital. But at the very same time as different types of capital are exchangeable, each capital must maintain a minimum of autonomy. Thus, in order to be acceptable to the general public, hierarchy must be based on ‘merit’ to some extent. Universities also have to maintain a balance. For example elite universities in the Us charge high fees but also provide generous scholarships. Scholarships attract good students that keep its ranking high, which in turn justifies high fees.

In China, at least until the very recent time, socially produced hierarchy in higher education has significant moral connotations. For example, lecturers and students from top universities are expected to be more vocal in criticizing the status quo, and the state has to be more careful in dealing with professors from these institutions. In a largely authoritarian and politically conservative system, this status provides the institutions with special clout to be more independent, critical, daring in thinking alternatives, and sometimes more eccentric in behavior. People rank the universities high to counteract the state power and private economic interest, no matter how symbolically.

New battles.

Hierarchy itself may not be a problem. The issue is what kind of hierarchy prevails. Our goals should be, apart from continuing the historical progress of destabilizing and 'softening' hierarchy in general, making the hegemonic hierarchy more ethical. In Asia as well as elsewhere, states have been active in domesticating and incorporating the institutions that are high in hierarchy. The corporate world may have similar desires, although their efforts are less orchestrated and their relations to universities less clear. But both the state and the economic establishment need seemingly independent universities for the purpose of legitimization. (Say, the state occasionally needs some 'independent scholars' to back their views, and financial institutes also like donating money to 'independent' learning institutes.) The contradictions internal to the project of legitimization provide important space for action. Furthermore, the interests of the state and of the capital do not always fit well, and playing one against the other can be another strategy.

I cannot quite imagine autonomous universities in the practical sense. As Mao Zedong repeatedly reminded us, intellectuals are a piece of feather that cannot exist without someone else's skin. We need others for our material survival. But perhaps we can fight for a more 'autonomous' evaluation system with strong moral and ethical concerns. Another important battle field is pre-University education. I am not too worried about the corporatization or privatization of universities as I believe that that will not go too far. Even state bureaucrats and diehard capitalists would frown upon universities that have no intellectual or ideological teeth at all. What is much more dangerous, for China, is the ongoing process of privatization and hierarchization in secondary education. As it is less easy to move into higher education with money alone, well-off families start the race earlier. Parents spend thousands of Us dollars to send children to good primary and high schools and even kindergartens2. In Japan, elite private universities such as Keio and Waseda setup their own so-called 'escalator' system, including kindergartens and primary and secondary schools. Children from wealthy families buy the expensive ticket to enter the escalator on the ground floor, which takes them to the top universities in the future with certain

‘merits.’ Thus social inequality is produced and reproduced without upsetting the ‘merit’-based hierarchy of universities. In China, except for those who are desperate to consolidate their newly-acquired financial assets into firm class status, most people want to escape from the frenzied competition in which children became the main victims. Thus there is social base for mobilization to fight against this trend. Among other things, top universities may be able to do something, even symbolically, to counteract the education industry.

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Résumé

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