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**The Impact of School Re-Mapping on China's Universal Education in the Rural
Areas: A Case Study of Guangdong Province**

Dr. Shaohua, Xie

Faculty of Educational Economics and Management

College of Education Sciences

South China Normal University

People's Republic of China

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Background:

A Brief Review of National Compulsory Education Development Since 1980

In 1981, the total school-age child population across the whole country was 0.12018 billion, of which 0.11175 billion were enrolled in schools. The national average primary school enrolment was 93%. Altogether, there were 894,000 primary schools with a total student population of 0.143328 billion. 858,000 schools, that is, 96% were located in the rural areas, taking in 0.124674 students, which is 87% of the total primary student population. Ever since December 1980 when the Central Committee of the C.P.C issued the document *Decisions About Popularizing Primary Education*, universal education in the mainland of China has undergone the greatest changes in the past two decades in terms of system-wide scale and structure. The next four years saw great efforts and emphasis from all levels of governments put on primary education to accelerate its popularization. As a result, the national average primary school enrolment was increased from 93% to 95%.

In May 1985, another milestone document *Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.C About Education System Reform* was published. This again did give a rigorous push to the popularization of primary education, bringing the national average school enrolment to 95.9%. Of most importance was the pass of *Compulsory Education Law of People's Republic of China* on April 12, 1986. This symbolized the beginning of a new stage of universal education development in the main land of China. In order to put the law in effect, education authorities of the State Council via the State Council Office, issued an announcement, making explicit its opinions in principle in the following aspects:

- Basic requirements for popularizing 9-year compulsory education;
- Different implementation of compulsory education in different region;

- Exempting tuition fee and putting grant-in-aid scheme into practice;
- Establishment and mapping of schools, and standards for running schools;
- Education funds and capital construction investment;
- Teaching staff;
- Management system;
- Compulsory education of the handicapped children;
- Assessment and supervision; and
- Related legal responsibilities, etc.

Local governments strictly followed the requirements set by the law. Different regions phased their implementation of compulsory education in accordance with their own actual conditions, carefully planned and made much progress. National average percentage of primary school enrolment reached 97.8% in 1990. Lower secondary education also made steady progress during this period. The proportion of primary school graduates entering lower secondary school has increased, from 68.4% in 1985 to 74.6% in 1990. The popularization of compulsory education was steadily promoted during the following decade with the successive issuing of several important documents. In February 1992, State Council approved the *Detailed Rules and Regulations for Implementing Compulsory Education Law of People's Republic of China*. A year later, the Central Committee of the C.P.C and State Council issued *Program for China's Education Reform and Development* in February 1993. Most significantly, the Central Committee of the C.P.C and State Council held the second National Conference for Education since 1978 in June 1994, to mobilize the whole nation to put the above-mentioned Program into effect. By 1995, the total number of students enrolled in primary school reached 0.132 billion and gross enrolment increased to 98.5%. Lower secondary school students totaled over 47 million and gross enrolment reached 78.4%. While national average enrolment rate for compulsory education kept rising through all these years, from 1996 onward, more social attention was directed to some specific weak areas in the popularization of compulsory education, for example, enrolment rate of school-age children on the move, school-age girls and the handicapped came into the spotlight. By the end of 1998, national primary school enrolment rate had reached 98.93% and gross enrolment rate of lower secondary school students increase up to 87.3%.

Development of Compulsory Education in Guangdong Province Since 1980

Guangdong (Canton) province is located in the southern part of China. According the statistics of the 2000 census, its population is about 86.5 millions, almost five times as big as that of the whole Australia. Right from the beginning of the 1980s, Guangdong province was chosen to the experimental region for the basic national policy of "reform and openness". Ever since then, it has remained one of the major frontiers in China's political, social and in particular, economic life. After the issuing of the document *Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.C About Education System Reform*, the National Education Committee (the Former Ministry of Education) categorized the whole country into three parts. Each part was designated to popularize compulsory education at different phases. Guangdong province was among the eight provinces and cities (the rest seven were Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, Liaoning, Shandong, Jiangsu and Zhejiang) that were to popularize compulsory education around the end of the 1990s. With strong economic backup and steady increase of funding, Guangdong province was the first to popularize compulsory education across the country and its school-age children's enrolment rate remains above the national average as shown in **Table 1**. below:

**Table 1: Developments Of Compulsory Education Popularization
 At National And Provincial Levels**

	1995		1999		2000	
	National	Guangdong	National	Guangdong	National	Guangdong
Primary enrolment rate	98.5%	99.54%	99.09%	99.70%	99.11%	99.70%
Primary year five retention rate	N/A	82.47%	92.48%	99.54%	94.54%	100.00%
Lower secondary enrolment rate	78.4%	91.71%	88.6%	99.82%	N/A	99.55%

From the 1980s up to the early half of 1999, this period can be regarded as a stage of expanding the scale of compulsory education in the mainland of China. Rigorous efforts from both Central and local governments were made to meet social education demands in terms of school places. In doing so, many new primary and lower secondary schools were set up to take in as many school-age children as possible. Newly-built schools were located wherever there were a certain number of school-age children to the extent that every hamlet was encouraged to at least run a primary school. And as a matter of fact, almost every hamlet did so, either run a primary school or a 'Teaching Spot' where there were only two grades of about twenty kids or so. In the mountainous and remote country areas, the slogan was "send education to the front door of every family". Therefore, the popularization of compulsory education at this stage is also named an "extensive education featuring school place demand meeting". Although the scale of compulsory education expanded, many local governments and their education authorities found themselves deep in debt. Even if in economically advanced provinces like Guangdong, regular funding for compulsory education, take the year 1998 for example, was some 3 billions short. It is undoubted that governments succeeded in offering enough school places for school-age children and pushing school enrolment rate up rapidly, but the quality of compulsory education also undoubtedly declined because of the shortage of teaching and administrative staff, and in particular, fiscal resources. As such, the rhetoric for compulsory education changed from scale to 'efficiency and effectiveness' and 'quality' became the central issue.

New Policies for Compulsory Education in P.R. China at The Turn of the Century

On June 13th 1999, the Central Committee of the C.P.C released an important document "*Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.C and State Council About Deepening Education Reform to Thoroughly Promote Quality Education*". This is a milestone document, signaling a new direction and new phase for compulsory education development in China. As usual, local governments responded quickly and followed very closely. The Party Committee and the Government of Guangdong province issued a document stating its "*Opinions About Implementing The 'Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.C and*

State Council About Deepening Education Reform to Thoroughly Promote Quality Education". Soon after, the two Administration Offices of the Provincial Party Committee and the Government of Guangdong province distributed an announcement about "*The Related Issues In Putting Into Effect 'Opinions About Implementing The 'Decision of the Central Committee of the C.P.C and State Council About Deepening Education Reform to Thoroughly Promote Quality Education'*". In this announcement, the two administration offices, on behalf of The Party Committee and Government of Guangdong province, detailed the responsibilities and major tasks of relevant functional offices of the provincial government. Of all the twenty-seven major areas of tasks that were targeted, sixteen were to be handled by the Provincial Education Council either alone or in association with other government offices. A deadline set for all work teams to finish was June 30th 2001, a time range of three months and a half.

One thing that must be pointed out here is, prior to the delivery of the announcement, the education head office had just gone through the process of restructuring, resulting in a cut-off of around 40% staff. Indeed, so many tasks in such a tight range of time were simply too much for the head office to handle, for example, it tried for about eight weeks to re-map the upper secondary education of the whole province, only to find it was far beyond it. Therefore, it turned to outside organizations and personnel for help. Within this context, the author of this paper was commissioned to chair a taskforce responsible for the "Adjustment and Optimisation of The Educational Structure of Guangdong Province".

Initially, I was supposed to just finish the re-mapping of the upper secondary education left undone by staff members of the head office. However, as work went on, my contract kept changing and growing like a rolling snowball until finally every level, every kind every aspects associated with education structure were included as suggested by the name of the project "Adjustment and Optimisation of The Educational Structure of Guangdong Province". Issues targeted in the project were as follows:

- Scales of all levels of education from pre-primary to postgraduate study;
- Structure ratio of all levels of education;
- Scales for three-year and four-year undergraduate and post-graduate education, and their ratio structure;
- Scales of all kinds of tertiary education and their ratio structure;
- Regional mapping of tertiary education;
- Scales for General and Vocational Upper Secondary Education and their ratio structure;
- Ratio Structure for Upper Secondary Education subjects;
- Ownership structures for all levels and all kinds of education; and
- Key measures for regulation and optimization.

While work was in process, the State Education Council and the Ministry of Finance (2001) released an "Announcement About Plan To Adjust School Mapping of Primary and Secondary Education". The Education Office of Guangdong Province (2001) soon distributed an "Internal Plain-code Telegram" as a quick response to the central government's announcement. The aims of the telegram, as explicitly stated, were to 'optimising educational resources' and to 'promote the benefit of school running'. Underpinned by the economic rationale of 'benefit of scale', different specific minimum scale requirements were set for primary and lower secondary schools both in plain and mountainous regions. In simplified form, these are tabled below:

Table 2: Minimum Size Requirements for Primary and Lower Secondary Schools

	Plain Region (Average)			Mountainous Region (Average)		
	School Size	Class Number	Class Size	School Size	Class Number	Class Size
Primary	500			300		
Lower Secondary	900	18	50	600	12	50

On top of the minimum requirements, there were quite a few other supplementary regulations as listed below:

- That the service radius of primary schools in the plain regions should generally be within two kilometers;
- That the service radius of primary schools in the mountainous and other regions should be decided local education authorities;
- That removal priority should be given to schools not rationally located, low in quality, and with perilous buildings;
- That adjustment stress should be focused on hamlet primary schools and 'teaching spot', in particular, schools with less than one hundred students and six classes, and the dispersed teaching spots;
- That a hamlet is encouraged to run a primary school in corporation with another hamlet, and establishment of demonstrative central primary schools run by a village or town is promoted in plain areas; school size should be increased as much as possible;
- That mountainous regions and those with less transport facilities are encouraged to run boarding schools accommodating grade 4-6 olds;
- That basically, each village or town runs only one lower secondary school. Unless it has a population of more than forty thousand, it is not encouraged to run another one;
- That sparsely populated areas are encouraged to 9-year schools;
- That the focus of adjusting lower secondary schools is on schools in the countryside with less than 300 students and 12 classes; and
- That country lower secondary schools in the regions with less transport facilities should be changed into boarding schools.

Within such a framework of terms of reference, schools to be adjusted were categorized into three groups: to be reconstructed and enlarged, to be removed, and to be newly built. Details are outlined in **Table 3** and **Table 4** below:

Table 3: Guangdong Primary Schools To Be Adjusted

	2000 Data				Schools to Be Adjusted								
					2001			2002			2003		
	Scho ols	Teachi ng Spots	Class es	Clas s Size	Reconstr uct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To Be Newl y- built	Reconstr uct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To Be Newl y- Set- up	Reconstr uct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To Be Newl y- Set- up
Tot al	24202	8090	249678	37	1511	2831	241	1103	1840	178	984	1618	194
GZ	1626	234	18642	40	71	56	9	38	66	3	33	32	6
SZ	353		6658	45	11	2	2	12		2	6		2
ZH	199	15	2479	41	4	30	12	16	15	7	8	5	5
ST	864	46	13394	43	27	45	45	24	57	46	28	59	30
SG	1303	611	11141	31	116	347	21	113	395	3	113	379	7
HY	1510	781	12719	27	83	293	8	46	144	7	80	89	3
MZ	2254	765	19687	30	129	398	3	53	149	1	45	113	
HZ	1231	245	10161	33	6	130	4	7	68	3	5	31	2
SW	842	200	9572	44	146	83	10	121	53	8	106	33	8
DG	552	11	5932	46	11	40	10	4	35	6	3	28	5
ZS	347	13	3936	45	9	16	1	12	16	2	4	11	2
JM	1230	196	11166	38		71	3	1	75	3	0	54	1
FS	529	52	6262	42	19	43	5	8	38	5	15	69	4
YJ	816	169	7773	39	51	108	2	31	56	5	26	54	8
ZJ	2208	1516	25069	40	370	125	32	213	110	16	173	90	17
MM	1965	866	22464	38	161	129	28	213	131	41	155	156	48
ZQ	1546	510	13069	32	35	231	21	37	147	6	61	129	14

QY	1527	537	13304	33	122	459	10	32	137	2	34	147	12
CZ	780		7524	37	50	60	1	22	32	2	10	33	12
JY	1362	905	16678	38	56	37	13	79	25	9	57	25	6
YF	941	411	9218	35	34	107	1	21	61	1	22	58	2
SD	217	7	2830	46		21			30			23	

Table 4: Guangdong Lower Secondary Schools To Be Adjusted

	2000 Data				Schools To Be Adjusted								
					2001			2002			2003		
	Scho ols	Teachi ng Spots	Class es	Clas s Size	Reconst ruct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To Be Newly- Set- up	Reconst ruct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To BeNewly- Set-up	Reconst ruct & Enlarge	Remo ve	To BeNewly- Set-up
Tot al	3964	31	83407	55	323	166	53	256	114	61	250	160	53
GZ	388		8414		19	8	2	4	2	2	5	14	7
SZ	94		2403	44						1	1		2
ZH	42		1021	47						2	2		1
ST	200	19	4869	51	8	8	11	6	7	15	2	7	5
SG	220		3650	49	42	23	4	20	19	2	23	35	6
HY	182		3224	59	12	10	2	13	8	2	8	11	1
MZ	282		5778	57	20	3		7	2	1	8	4	1
HZ	154		2881	61	3	8					1	13	
SW	129	4	3281	55	35	9	3	38	4	3	35	3	2

DG	77		2038	55	5	5	4	1	2	4			2
ZS	79	8	1692	52				2	2		1	1	
JM	276		4592	51		6	3		7	3		7	
FS	124		3195	52	12	2	3	7			9	4	2
YJ	106		2658	61	10	3	1	5	4		6	4	
ZJ	326		6548	61	20	14	5	22	12	4	19	7	4
MM	302		6793	57	84	17	1	77	11	10	88	20	7
ZQ	194		4139	54	16	16	2	16	12	1	10	9	2
QY	237		4211	56	1	12	6	2	5	1	8	11	2
CZ	131		2463	59	2			1	1	7	1	2	5
JY	245		5316	56	29	15	4	33	10	3	19		4
YF	113		2744	54	3	4		2	2		4	4	
SD	63		1497	52	2	3	2		4			4	

The total number of schools to be adjusted across the whole province in three years of time and the sub totals of each category is provided in **Table 5 (PTO)**:

Table 5: Total and Sub-totals of Schools To be adjusted.

	2001			2002			2003			Sub-tota l (3)
	Recons truct & Enlarge	Rem ove	To Be Newl y- Set- up	Recons truct & Enlarge	Rem ove	To Be Newl y- Set- up	Recons truct & Enlarge	Rem ove	To Be Newl y- Set- up	
Primar y School s	1511	2831	241	1103	1840	178	984	1618	194	105 00
Lower Seco ndary School s	323	166	53	256	114	61	250	160	53	143 6
Sub- total (1)	1834	2997	294	1359	1954	239	1234	1778	247	
Sub- total (2)	5125			3552			3259			
Total										11936

At the time when the telegram was distributed, there were all together 24,202 primary schools and 3,023 lower secondary schools throughout the province. It means that, within three years of time, 43.38% primary schools and 47.5 lower secondary schools will be 'adjusted'. At the primary level, 3,598 (14.866%) schools will be reconstructed and enlarged; 6,289 (25.98%) schools and teaching spots will be removed; and 613 new schools will be set up, a net reduction of 5,676 schools. At the lower secondary level, 829 (27.4%) schools will be reconstructed and enlarged, 440 (14.55%) schools removed, and 167 new ones built, a net decrease of 273 schools. Put together, 43.84% primary and lower secondary schools are to be adjusted or remapped! The change is so big and so prompt that only in due course will its impact be felt deeply and profoundly.

Immediate Impact As Perceived

Given the rigor and promptness of the re-mapping of primary and lower secondary schools, members of the taskforce for "Adjustment and Optimisation of The Educational Structure of Guangdong Province" paid particular attention to it at some stage of the project. The team conducted seven un-structured group interviews across the province, each lasting for about three hours and a half. All together, there were around 180 participants, including parents, grassroots teachers, school administrators, education officers of all levels of local governments, and education theorists. In addition, members of the taskforce paid, in each region, three or four visits to schools and teaching spots. On each visit, a semi-structured

interview was conducted. Participants of these interviews were mainly teachers and administrator of the school visited, with or without the presence of education officer who were accompanying us. All interviews were taped. Where participants felt there was not enough time to fully express their opinions, they were encouraged to write down what they wanted to say and post to us later within fifteen days. All tapes and written materials were coded, categorised and analysed. Where there were contrasting opinions, a follow-up interview was conducted in an attempt to clarify things or to get more information until it was 'saturated'. In the end, opinions about the impact of school re-mapping were grouped into two: positive and negative. Details of typical opinions are listed below:

Positive:

Those who are in favor of school re-mapping can also be further divided into several groups:

One group of proponents were mainly education officers of local governments. Very interestingly, what they saw in re-mapping was not what policy makers thought at all. Because the announcement was distributed by the education central office in association with the central office of finance, many officers of local education authorities took re-mapping as a great opportunity to get addition funding from either the state government or the provincial government. This partly accounts for the reason why most of them responded so quickly that in only three days, all specific schools to be enlarged and reconstructed, or removed or relocated were identified, and detailed budgets for each specific school, region, province were done and sent in to the State Ministry of Education. This efficiency of bureaucrats says it all.

Another group of proponents were also education officers, particularly those closely connected with education finance. They had long been in trouble because of the non-sufficient funding and deep debts in all these years of popularization of compulsory education. They are, to some extent, informed by the theory of economy of scale. They believe or expect that a certain degree of scale increase will somehow pull them out of the trouble.

A third group was made up of senior teachers and school administrators who have been working and teaching at teaching spots or schools in remote areas ever since they graduated from a college. They favored the removal or relocation of schools or teaching spots because: (1) living and teaching conditions at these places are awful and they content that since they are doing as much as and as good as others do, they should have the same amount of resources of the same quality; (2) they feel very lonely, not just because they live and work in remote areas or up in the mountains, but because they almost have no connection with the outside world in terms of academic exchanges with teachers of other schools. One of our participants began his teaching career at a teaching spot when he was 19 years after graduation from a junior college. Now he is 58, just two years away from retirement. During the past 39 years, he married a local girl, had a family of four people, and only went away down the mountain three times! According to an education officer responsible for this school district, people like him are not few.

Still another group of participants was education administrators at the county or a lower level. They welcome school re-mapping in the hope (1) that it will save both their travel expenditure and time as present schools and teaching spots are scattered too disperse; (2) that it will improve management, particularly at teaching spots. The reality is that, at each teaching spot, there are one or two teachers taking care of twenty kids or so. Sometimes it is just because they live in the hamlet or have a family that they are assigned to work there. Without frequent supervision, teaching quality cannot be guaranteed. Occasionally, a teacher might be an hour late for class only because s/he has to handle family business first.

On my visit to such a spot, I even found a middle-aged drunk teacher delivering a Chinese class. And that was already half past ten in the morning!

Negative:

If proponents of school re-mapping are, on the whole, practical, opponents of it seem more rational. They seem to see it in more depth and breadth. Nonetheless, because the real business of school re-mapping basically remains at the stage of planning and not much practice is going on for the time being, it is too early and also too difficult for the opponents to identify its specific impacts. As such, opposition mainly takes the forms of suspicion and concern.

A large proportion of the participants strongly expressed their suspicion about the real intentions and rhetoric of school re-mapping. To them 'quality education' is no more than a banner under which what is eagerly sought after is the benefits of increasing the sizes of both schools and classes. Their reasoning is simple but convincing. As shown in Tables 4 and 5, in year 2000, the average class size in primary schools was 37 and that in lower secondary schools was 55. So teachers and school administrators frequently ask, 'I'm overloaded with 55 and can hardly manage to ensure quality', 'everybody knows that', 'now you want me to take care of more kids so that you can deploy resources more rationally and promote quality, tell me why should I believe you.' Although opinions differ about the ideal size of class (see Lafleur et al, 1974; Angus et al, 1983; Larkins and Keeves, 1984; Glass and Smith, 1979; Glass et al, 1982; Mitchell, 1989; and Campbell, 1981), the size of ranging from twenty to forty seems to be acceptable to many. On the basis of 37 or 55, any increase in number seems to be, in many practitioners' mind, the wrong direction for quality education.

A group of high-ranking education officers feel puzzled. Just ten years ago, they were commanded to open as many schools and teaching spots as possible to ensure that every school-age child is enrolled, "to send education to the front door of the parents" as the then slogan said. They need time to buffer the suddenness of the change. Moreover, many of this group expressed their concern and worry that parents and students will find it too difficult to accept the reality that they will have to leave where they felt comfortable in the past and move into a new environment. Worst of all, they feel afraid that removal and relocation of schools and teaching spots might be seen by students and their parents as a takeover of education from their front door. On top of that, they feel uncertain if the elders of hamlet would allow their schools to be removed or relocated since culture in the country assumes that every hamlet should run a school, if not, its residents would make a very poor show of themselves. Losing face is a very big issue in most of the rural areas in China, and even more so in the Mingnan culture. Seen in such a context, the re-mapping of schools and teaching spots does have a covert potential of causing some social instability and disturbance. And part of their concerns easily found echoes among parents.

Parents not only felt the 'taking away of education from them, they also worried about something else more realistic and important. The encouraged establishment of boarding schools, both primary and lower secondary bring the issue of school fee and other expenses up to the foremost front. To parents, going to a boarding school directly means a big increase of expenses as compared to going to a school nearby or just in the neighborhood. The few parents participated in our interview said they could not afford it. This might be true of many families in the poor and mountainous regions. According to statistics, average annual GDP per head is around 3,000 Chinese Yuan (equivalent to 362 US Dollars). As almost everyone in the profession of statistics knows, this figure is at least 30% inflated (as a matter of fact, there is a saying that "a baby hen hatched in a certain year is counted to lay twenty-four eggs, and statistics is based on the market exchange value of those eggs). So the real

annual income per head is at most about 200 US dollars. Members of my taskforce held several talks with parents and leaders of boarding schools, trying to find the exact amount of annual fee per student in a lower secondary boarding school, and the answer is "not less than 1,000 Chinese Yuan (equal to 120 US dollars), which means half of the family income will be spent on one child's compulsory schooling. The reality is that almost every family in the country has at least more than one child. In an average country family, this means all family annual income is just enough for children's school fees. Therefore, what we often heard is "Okay, it is compulsory education. You can force my kids to school, but I have no money to afford it except my life". Under such circumstance, it can be envisaged that, to some extent, school re-mapping, in particular, school removal and relocation might have great impact on the popularization of compulsory education in the countryside, although not immediately. We will wait and see.

Note: Translation of all the referred governmental documents in this paper is by the author himself and therefore, should not be taken as official.

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