

Education, class and adaptation in China's world city¹

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This discussion draws on a series of field-work visits to the Shanghai Television University and the Shanghai Media Group between 2003 and 2006. In that period the impact of a new economic rationale, whereby workers must skill up or ship out of the workforce, was keenly felt both in the service industries and in the lower echelons of professions. The University provided an opportunity to adapt oneself through new qualifications and thus through a constant re-figuration of the working self. At the same time as it supplied these opportunities, the University itself was a site in which these changes were played out and where workers were aware of the pressures in their own lives. In particular, the difficult relationship between media as entertainment and media as a platform for educational content demonstrates the tension between adaptation and creativity as value-laden descriptions of the processes of up-skilling and meeting market demands. Given that this case study is in Shanghai, a city with an extremely mixed reputation for both creative dynamism and the deadening hand of government power plays, the media's role in the Chinese workforce is an ambivalent one.

Keywords: distance learning; adaptation; knowledge economy; creativity; media education; Shanghai; television education

Introduction

Shanghai is a competitive city with little use for unskilled labor. Those that are unskilled, or insufficiently skilled for new tasks, will find themselves unemployed, or undercut by cheap migrant workers from nearby provinces. Shanghai workers are therefore acutely aware of the pressures and opportunities created by the new economy and, in particular, by the new emphasis on flexibility, adaptability and, arguably, creative choice in the workplace. It is in this environment that the Shanghai Television University (SHTVU) has honed its contemporary profile over the past ten years. The University provides degree, diplomas, and vocational training for people of all ages, and is especially valuable for those that do not fit the academic and class profile of those seeking an élite education in the top universities in the city. Although the television university system has been in operation since the mid-1970s, the contemporary Shanghai Television University exemplifies the ambitions of its students through its robust response to the challenges of China's educational and media environment. The context and nature of this response is the subject of the following discussion.

Method

The research for this paper was carried out under the auspices of the creative industries in China project at Queensland University of Technology. The project

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flagged *media* and *education* as two areas where economic advantage and creative input could be co-located and defined as inputs to national development. The rationale for the choice of case study was that the SHTVU organization is directly involved in training employees for the knowledge economy (in the services and banking sector, as well as media workers through the Shanghai Media Group), and for the technical industries that support its development (IT and software engineering). Furthermore, SHTVU delivers most pedagogical content via the internet or on television. It is therefore engaged in both the media and education industries, and is located in one of two key hubs of creative industries in China: Shanghai. The approach taken was based on accepted area studies and media studies data collection methods: semi-structured interviews with key informants (including producers and users); site visits over three years; on-site data supplemented by contextual reading and general discussions in the locus (Shanghai) aimed at determining an appropriate theoretical response to the material gathered.²

The first round of interviews at SHTVU, were paired with interview data collected at elite organizations in Beijing (the EMBA cohorts in Tsinghua and Beijing Management Schools). The gaps between the Beijing and Shanghai interviewees in terms of staff morale, course cost, delivery methods, graduate achievement and expectations, and physical location of the learning centres, were a timely reminder of the class differentials that inform the organization of education and opportunity in China. The present analysis considers the concept of class structures when describing the motivation for lifelong learning and community education in Shanghai.

SHTVU educates working and mature students, some for full degree courses, and many for “just-in-time” training and vocational upgrades, and short courses. These are not highly prestigious qualifications but rather supply what I call here the “working middle class” with the educational wherewithal to become “richer than before” (see Donald & Zheng, 2008) and thus more securely oriented in China’s world city. The term “working middle” is based on the idea of the working poor in the United States, where the poverty line defines those who work but are yet never secure in their relation to social expectations of everyday life and expenses. This is clearly different from the working poor in China who are generally peasants in poorer, rural provinces, and/or migrants in low-paid work in cities, and who are very poor indeed by any benchmark. The “working middle class” is therefore coined to describe those who might once have thought of themselves as the working proletariat, but are now seeing their future in professional employment, with aspirations to enjoy the fruits of the reform era, or at least to survive it (Lu, 2006; Zhou, Tuma, & Moen, 1997). They are not the middle class yet (and may never be so), nor are they the new rich (far from it), but they are linked politically and socially to the expectations of continuing employment and quality of life that is the lynchpin of economic rhetoric in China. This links the *working middle* to the “*hexie zhongchan*” (the harmonious middle market).

The data from senior staff at SHTVU and the Media Group also supports the creative industries approach to thinking about development in China. Broadly, and other articles in this collection will offer further explanation, this approach facilitates a cultural turn in culture and economics, so that activities which involve creative endeavour are recognized as economic drivers rather than cultural loss leaders. This is a pro-active, output-oriented research model, seeking to assist such industries in

that as they attract the notice and favour of policy makers, they will also attract systematic investment. Thus, these industries grow in capacity, and more fully realise creative human potential and technological innovative possibility. If different sectors of the creative economy are converged as the process of economic recognition proceeds, the resulting impact on the economy, on innovation and on human capital will be exponentially increased. The meshing of media and education at SHTVU indicates the convergence of communications technologies with a vital service sector, education. As I indicate in my concluding section, the notice of key policy makers had indeed been piqued by 2003. So although not calling the convergence a creative industries turn, the agenda was formed around the idea of human potential, new technologies, and an adaptive approach to training.

Change, class, and content

In 2001–2002, the Shanghai Television University Group underwent a major restructure. The University and the Television station, which ran the Shanghai “Green Leaf” channel on China’s Education TV (CETV) network, were merged to enhance the competitiveness of both enterprises – advertising media space and creating content on the one hand, and delivering educational content via broadcast and digital media on the other. The key strategy was to move the shows with most popularity, including some educational shows, and therefore the greatest share of the target audience, to a pay TV system, and away from the free-to-air channel. The aim was to increase the paying subscriber base from 5000 to one million in three years. At the same time, the University was charged with expanding their use of Chinese internet resources to deliver online, archived learning materials for the student body. The objective was to develop an adaptive, skilled workforce serving a national and global enterprise: Shanghai.

The merger of the two organizations (television education and television production) was a decisive move to an integrated service economy, and brought significant benefits to the University in terms of income and competitive edge in a strong educational environment. In the short term it did also cause problems for viewers (who could not understand why their favourite shows were now on a pay-TV channel), and in terms of great pressure on all staff to create content attractive to a pay-tv delivery platform. Additional stress was reported by mid-level teaching staff (Associate professors and below). This was directly related to the constant demands on them for curriculum flexibility in the face of market pressures on vocational shifts for their graduates. Flexibility is part of the innovation equation for this level of educational endeavour, but was experienced as a drain on teacher’s energy, forcing them to operate outside actual areas of expertise.

For those readers involved in contemporary universities, the story of restructures, disciplinary intervention and attendant sense of exhaustion amongst academics and lecturers is probably all too familiar. However, the reconfiguration of education and media as enterprises has an arguably greater impact in the post-socialist, new class context of China.

First, the new system emphasises consumer choice and viability. Previously, education-on-television had operated with the guarantee of subsidy and a grateful audience. The “Green Leaf” channel had been a free provider of cheap fill-in shows in an otherwise educational context. It is now operating in direct competition with

specialized Pay TV channels under the influential Shanghai Media Group banner as well as the big entertainment trans-provincial providers. Secondly, the viewer base is of the “working middle”, which is vociferous in audience feedback, but which has limited funds and therefore little cachet for advertisers. Class thereby becomes a factor not just in the value of the qualification, but also in the character of the delivery platform itself. Third, and ironically for the Green Leaf channel, even the expected cross-over audience of television university students to Pay TV do not necessarily want to pay for entertainment which is inferior to the aspirational worlds of the Shanghai Media Group’s major and higher quality entertainment vehicles.

In an interview in 2003, “X”, then the director of the television station remarked, “in former years we could rely on the hand of Government to protect us from direct external and internal competition, but now we have to shake the hand of the market – our whole mindset has to shift into an adaptive and creative mode”.³ X regretted that he and his staff experienced great pressure from those who had previously not had to pay for favourite content. It was difficult to explain to these viewers the rationale for pay TV. This was straightforward in industry terms however: although the Ministry for Education required SHTVU to carry educational content, they were no longer able to claim substantial subsidy, and this meant other shows had to turn the profit, and therefore provide the subsidy, instead. They therefore competed directly with the entertainment and general content stations operating in the Shanghai broadcast footprint.

As director and executive producer of entertainment on the Green Leaf channel, X could dictate the timing and duration of educational shows versus pure entertainment “filler”, which was both a privilege and another source of stress: “it’s me who feels the real pressure of making the channel pay”. With upwards of 110,000 graduated students, it would not have been surprising if the then academic co-director, (latterly 2006 onwards- President of the Group) “Y”, felt somewhat sidelined by this comment. On the contrary, he saw the release of some pressure to the media professionals as an opportunity for him as an educator to reach out in other directions and create a strong university, which could compete with the greatest and the best in Shanghai’s firmament. An unexpected result of the merger was therefore an increased sense of confidence and capacity in the University. Indeed Y foresaw a time when a vocational television university could dare to work with the Ministry towards cross-campus modules between Fudan University, SHTV and Jiaotong University. This sort of development runs counter to the theory of class division in urban China – in so far as it promotes more equivalence between the working middle, the intellectual élites and the rich. It also however ties into the aspirational “harmony” of bringing the *working middle* into alignment with political narratives of the new middle class, further supporting the intellectual and business élites, although not sharing their income levels. The rise of the distance- based, part-time university student is a complementary necessity for Shanghai’s local and global commitment to an educated, creative and adaptive workforce.⁴ It is also a structured response to workers’ insecurity within a hyper-context of accelerated modernity.

In 2003 the television university had been in operation for nearly thirty years (taking into account the hiatus between 1966 and 1978 when it was closed by the Cultural Revolution). It has become known and appreciated for its outreach to metropolitan mature learners, to semi-rural learners and to those who counted themselves outside the intelligentsia in Shanghai. Shanghai in 2006 had a total of 60

universities with 17.5% of the population either engaged in, or graduated from tertiary education,⁵ so such élites are not insubstantial. Nonetheless, the clientele attending or rather using the distance facilities of SHTVU has traditionally been more clearly articulated with vocational education, up-skilling, or, increasingly, the “just in time” education of contemporary media and business learning and teaching praxis.

“Just in time” is a term that has migrated from business to the creative industries lexicon and to sociology. It refers pragmatically to a production process whereby the “pull” of an order, or schedule for supply, signals the need to move fast to produce goods for delivery. The assumption is not that there are warehouses full of previously made, and expensively stored goods, but that the factory can respond to newly nuanced requirements of the customer without losing speed or quality. More generically, “just in time” refers to development and training strategies that are geared to perceive and react strategically to emerging needs or opportunities in the market or workplace. In the car industry this might require interchangeable base parts, designed to be re-engineered for diverse uses. In academic training the need is for a teaching staff and curriculum that can also be “re-engineered” to service new bodies of knowledge, new skill sets and therefore new job opportunities for graduates, and training for graduates already working but in industries where the operational bases are shifting. It is particularly relevant for institutions that claim to give their students an advantage in work readiness. For the SHTVU students, readiness for an unregulated and unknown future is the best outcome that they can gain from tertiary study. Examples of “just in time” course elements at SHTVU in 2004 included the digitization of financial institutions. Where once a bank employee needed basic accounting (and, in China, to be solidly calm in the face of bureaucratic ineptitude and customer despair), now they need to understand a range of softwares, and to have the flexibility of mind to grasp many more as the banks upgrade in the coming years. The students concurred with staff that they were studying for the immediate demands of work, but also for a future which promised a great deal of change and opportunity:

I am studying accounting. Shanghai is developing so fast, and many international businesses are setting up here, so I think this specialization will afford me a lot of good opportunities ... but it won't be that I am always in accounting, I am a dynamic person who likes to try new things. And I believe that I will regret it if I limit myself too soon in one particular field... I will continuously re-equip myself with new knowledge so I can face the future. (Respondent 1)

I am studying finance, and in fact I already work in this field. It is really necessary to refresh ourselves with new knowledge after 10–15 years out of school. The knowledge we have from then is completely insufficient to cope with the fast-paced growth that our society has been experiencing, especially over the last ten years. Even friends of mine who don't work in finance are enrolling to get a grasp of the basics of the subject. You can see that people in Shanghai are really keen to learn, in a way it doesn't matter what, just so long as it helps them achieve a positive driving force to take to work. (Respondent 4)

Another growth area is the law. China is notoriously governed in a rule *by* law, rather than rule *of* law political environment (Pei, 2006, pp. 65–69). Lawyers have not therefore been a core profession in the way that they are in western democracies. Now, as more rights to property are brought into the constitution, and as more people own more, and risk more, in the process of capitalization, law is increasingly

required to solve disputes and develop regulations (Cai, 2005; Nathan, 1997, pp. 228–249; Morton, 2007). The rule *by law* is still in place, but interpretation and argument are increasingly possible. Unsurprisingly then we met students studying the law with a view to enhancing their current professional qualifications and status.

I am studying law. That may be because a lot of my friends are in this field, but it is also a practical decision. Since China has joined the WTO, I can see that there will be increasing demands for the revision and amendment of laws and regulations. Law will take its place in many aspects of society. (Respondent 3)

Lifelong learning

The Shanghai Television University was established in 1960 as part of the Chinese Television Education network. It was then a one-way broadcast and printed material system, with no technological means for two-way access to the process of learning. At the end of 1993, SHTVU researched and delivered the Shanghai residents' computer ability test, testing the degree of penetration of the technology and the ways in which it was or might be developed through citizen training. In 1999, a Municipal Skill and Training conference noted that more than 2 million Shanghai'ese were taking such tests and exams each year. More than 60% passed and received certifications for future employment. Open-learning courses with a BA option were introduced in 1996, and the first full graduation from that initiative took place in 2004. By the late 1990s, the University had developed a sophisticated distance learning approach to its work, where interaction between learners, teachers and technology was valued. Under the direction of the Ministry of Education, the University in 2000 became part of the Shanghai Distance Education Group – comprising Shanghai Television University, the Shanghai Education Television Station (Green Leaf), the Audio-Visual Education Institute, and the Shanghai TV Secondary Specialized School – a technical facility with 10,000 registered students. There were, in 2004, 26 areas of specialization, with the most highly subscribed currently in Business, Administration and Logistics. Law, Economics, Foreign Languages, Chinese Literature and Culture, and General Sciences are also available. Students might be drawn from the rural periphery of the metropolitan district, and will study units such as Agricultural Community Management (*nongcun shequ guanli*), but most are urban and concentrate on industrial, technical and management related subjects of study at the core of the curriculum. In addition to the face to face learning modules, students have access to distance materials, placed online or collated on CD, and broadcast on television. There are upwards of 60 learning centres in the metropolitan district, so that students are not required to attend a central campus at any time, and students without home internet access have a place to go and study. By 2006, a new and spacious campus in the north of Shanghai (Guoyun Road) with direct wireless and network links to the various satellite stations and study centres was operational. It offered the sports and cultural facilities of a regular university, as well as the specific technical resources for distance learning. Local communities are encouraged to use the facilities.

In 2004, numbers were substantial: more than 10,000 students enrolled on the three-year BA course at the University and an additional 27,000 took up a foundation “junior college” course. In that year, there were a total of 110,000 taking

some kind of course at the University itself, or in the “Open Education College” (*kaifeng jiaoyu xueyuan*) which is incorporated into its structure. The same number, circa 110,000, have graduated. The University (and College) sees its role in the city’s education strategy as both expanding capacity (the numbers, and growth patterns speak for themselves) but also as a distributed institution deeply integrated into Shanghai’s social and spatial structure. The study centres and accessible campus facilities are part of this. So too, are events such as “Access the Internet” which attracts up to 80,000 people a year onto the campus. There are also plans in advanced stages of implementation to set up “continuing learners” centres’, community colleges where non-standard learners, especially elderly or disabled people, can use the internet and television to learn about health care, public hygiene and basic legal frameworks. The management curriculum is thus extended to self-management in a period of reform and reformulation of personal and social responsibility. As “Y” pointed out, Shanghai will thrive if it embraces its future as a knowledge-based city, and this can only happen if the citizenry can be educated to the standards and possibilities that such an economy entails.⁶

Class and aspiration

The students too have a history, and it is their trajectory from members of a post-revolutionary working class to a *nascent working-middle class* that underpins the story of the SHTVU’s transformation. I have referred to aspects of the new class system in urban China, predicating the working middle as a harmonious, aspirational version of the old proletariat. Evidence of class shifts is legion in Chinese social science. Patterns of consumption and income clustering (Bian & Breiger, 2005; MacKerras, 2006; Zhang, 2002, 2007), forms and foci of political protest (Yang & Calhoun, 2007), Government-sponsored research (such as the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences survey in 2005); and the growth of aspirational behaviours (Davis, 2005; Guang, 2003) demonstrate that there are many people in China who feel that they are, or would like to be, in the middle bracket of the latest post-revolutionary class structure. Nevertheless, the great disparities in income between the “new rich” and those that service the economy, not to mention those that feed it from the rural margins, suggest that there is significant segmentation in the new class and across its several manifestations. The average income of those “richer than before” is dwarfed by the success of entrepreneurs, and by the political and economic capital of the highly educated élites, leaders of industry, financiers and developers (Donald & Zheng, 2008).

The creation of maintenance of class difference was apparent through our interviews in Beijing, with those enrolled in the Tsinghua EMBA. These students were high-performing office managers (female) and aspiring CEOs (male); all intending to work in the international business arena. Their aspirations were to play a significant role in the global class. In a few cases, they wanted to make an impact on the world of education and welfare on behalf of their home provinces, evincing a nice sense of social responsibility that was yet to be tested in the thick of actual financial success. They are the shoots and roots of the middle class élites, who have more than an even chance of both becoming seriously rich, and taking up leadership positions along their career path. As leaders, they will take on the mantle of power

and the continuity of influence, and their rising income differential is such that no comparisons may be drawn with other historical emergences of middle classes in European history.

Of course, the idea of the middle classes is always a contingent, not an absolute category. It is not, or not only, a Marxist form of description, but also a vanishing point of aspiration and social allegiance to self-betterment generally emergent in a period of relative economic success. The Chinese case is particularly complex, located as it is in a socialist Party State, but arguably all periods of class transformation are complicated at the time.

Class is a translated term, as is the notion of creative industries; both are “foreign bodies” in the Chinese system. Whilst it is true that one must always note the contingencies and context when using macro-theories in local environments, human societies can nonetheless bear comparison, especially with the growing pressure of globalization and economic mimesis. Deploying a macro-discourse may require constant revision and fieldwork, but the solipsism of national characteristics and essentialism is not a better path. As Bourdieu made abundantly clear in his work on social capital and the reproduction of status, class structures seek to establish boundaries of taste and exclusion as much as they focus on ways to constantly renew their membership. This is necessarily local but still produces a class discourse. In China, for instance, the “middle” is a peculiarly useful category that sidesteps previous class tensions and allows the government to strategise the harmonious society (*hexie shehui*) rhetoric through the willing self-interest of a growing number of urban citizens.

The SHTVU students are subject to the context of class in Shanghai. They are not especially well-off, nor are their teachers, but they are members of a new class of self-managing semi-professional people with a strong investment in Shanghai’s development. They are adaptive, flexible and alive to the challenges that they face and will continue to encounter in their working lives. To that extent, whether they become lawyers or hairdressers – and we interviewed both – they are professionally oriented and self-reliant. Their position on the periphery of the true urban élites does not contradict Shanghai’s status as a global and creative urban enterprise, but gives an example of the density of experience and local aspiration at work in the complexity of its growth. The consumers of China, much touted in the literature on business development,⁷ as well in recent discussions of social change (Croll, 2006), are also the workers of China. They also supply the aspirational, just in time “pull” factor in the Chinese economy. The lesson of the SHTVU is that these student-workers are willing to adapt, to train and re-train to make sure that their place in the economic order is safe.

World city education

While this paper is being written, most external attention on China is focussed on Beijing, and the Olympics. Shanghai, although involved in the Olympics to the degree that it is one of the sites for the Games’ football competition, is preparing itself much more actively to host World Expo 2010. There is little kudos to be gained from *not* being the main host Olympic city after all. But also, the World Expo with its historic links to internationalization and trade fairs is in any case a more apposite event for Shanghai. The city is listed on the prestigious GaWC index as a leader across the South China/Pacific Rim regions and on the third tier globally (Taylor,

2006). It has ambitions to be the key tourist and expo centre in China.⁸ Its main competitors are in the Pearl River delta; Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Shenzhen, but none have the sense of integrated growth and sheer municipal confidence of Shanghai. Crucially, if Shanghai's focus on the service industries and on training is carried through, then there will be exponential growth in all its industries, but especially those underpinned by a competent and creative workforce. This will indeed allow Shanghai to claim the moniker of world city.⁹

Contextualising the learners and educators at the SHTVU in the world city, one recognises the foresight of the merger, and the wisdom of students' motivation for self-improvement. In 2003, the course offerings at SHTVU were expanded to include exhibition management, and in other universities, "copyright" was becoming a core subject in business and media degrees. These initiatives reflect the WTO accession, the upcoming Expo and how Shanghai sees its place in the new world trade order. This was an example of "just in time" planning for an immediate need in the city's public enterprises and semi-private associated companies. Students at SHTVU are part of the vision, it is their working-middle class ambitions as much as the strategies of high-flying internationalists which make it all possible. I thus give the last word to the policy makers at the municipal level.

Everything that I heard and observed in Shanghai, at the level of the University, in the television station and amongst students, was underlined by the statements of Ding Xiaodong.¹⁰ In 2003, Ding was charged with managing the higher education sector in Shanghai municipality, with a responsibility that spanned both academic and vocational spheres of qualification. He was certain that, despite Beijing's no. 1 status in education overall, Shanghai preceded Beijing in terms of "idea and vision", that Shanghai's international strategy was cohesive and forward looking (offering for instance training in business in Chinese terms for overseas Chinese), that the slogan "technology is the first production force, but people are the first resource" accurately captured the pressure to change without losing sight of the centrality of human capital in creative change. And finally, music to the ears of the SHTVU, Ding was forceful on two points: first, that media and digital technology education need to be at the heart of the city's education strategy as its citizens will need that knowledge to participate in development; and second, that whilst the academic system is central to the quality of creativity in Shanghai, lifelong learning amongst a large proportion of its working population is the key to a sustainable world city.

In conclusion, the students, staff and institution of the Shanghai Media Group and its incorporated University, community colleges and television station, collectively embody the seriousness of purpose with which Shanghai is consolidating its position as a world city and a creative city in the Chinese context. The Group and University are not part of Shanghai's elite educational system, but their work and outlook gives a necessary opportunity to the working-middle class to refine and develop skills and knowledge that allow entry into the professional sphere of the workplace. Furthermore, the enterprise as a whole demonstrates a close relationship between media business practice and educational delivery, which are familiar aspects of the actual and desired processes of horizontal integration in other developed economies. As a world city, Shanghai is fortunate in its policy makers, educational leaders and media executives, who have shown the enterprise and courage to aim for change that might work for more than the international élites.

Notes

1. This research was funded by the ARC project 2003–2005, *Internationalising the Creative Industries*. Chief Investigators on the project were Hartley, Cunningham, Keane, Donald, Flew and Spurgeon.
2. The interviews and discussions, on which the analysis here is based, were conducted with staff, students and managers at the University and television station in the years after the merger in 2000–2003 and again in 2004, with a follow up visit in 2006 after the University had occupied its new 63 hectare campus.
3. Interview with the author, September, 16, 2003. By our return in 2004, X had moved onto a larger non-education television station and online media company.
4. The impact of globalization on education policy at the national/local level is discussed by Mok (2003), see also (Wang & Bergquist, 2003).
5. China Statistical Yearbook, 2006. Figures extrapolated from a 1% sample. Figures reiterated in the Shanghai Statistical Bureau webpage (2007), <http://www.stats-sh.gov.cn/2004shtj/tjgb/tjgb2006.htm>
6. Information taken from interviews with the author, 2003, 2004 and 2006. Other information is based on SHTVU publications and exhibited material on campus.
7. On links between global consumer culture and Chinese entrepreneurs see: Yu and Stough, 2006.
8. Interview with the author: Yin Min-fa and Zhu Guo-jian, Tourism Administrative Commission, Shanghai. March 2004.
9. Please note that world city and international city are not synonyms, however, and this chapter does not contradict the claims of Julie Lim (PhD thesis in preparation), that Shanghai has a problem with parochialism.
10. Interview with the author, August, 2003.

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