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# Chinese Teachers' Social Status and Authority in the Classroom: A historical perspective

## Abstract

*This paper examines the changes in Chinese teachers' social status and their authority in the classroom, tracing the political ups and downs they experienced since 1949 when the Chinese communist party took over. The paper points out that under the communist government which upholds the dictatorship of the proletariat, Chinese teachers have suffered discriminatory treatment and that great damage has been done to their social status and their authority in the classroom. The paper argues that lack of respect for teachers as human beings and as professionals is inherent in the communist totalitarian system. The paper acknowledges improvement since the economic reform started in 1978, yet maintains that the current political system in China still puts teachers at the mercy of the communist government. Through presenting an extreme case of control, it is hoped that the paper will help educators all over the world reflect on important issues concerning autonomy and respect for teachers.*

## Résumé

*Cet article analyse les changements intervenus dans le statut social des professeurs chinois et leur autorité en classe, en retraçant les hauts et les bas politiques qu'ils ont traversés depuis 1949 lors de l'avènement des communistes en Chine. L'auteur fait observer que sous le gouvernement*

*communiste qui prône la dictature du prolétariat, les professeurs chinois ont été fait l'objet de discrimination et que leur statut social et leur autorité en classe ont été sérieusement affectés. L'auteur soutient que le manque de respect pour les professeurs comme êtres humains et comme professionnels est inhérent au régime totalitaire communiste. L'auteur reconnaît qu'il y a eu une amélioration depuis que la réforme économique a débuté en 1978, même si elle affirme que l'actuel régime politique en Chine met les professeurs à la merci du gouvernement communiste. En présentant une étude de cas extrême, on peut espérer que cet article aidera les éducateurs du monde entier à réfléchir aux problèmes importants que pose l'autonomie et le respect des professeurs.*

In recent years, the Chinese government has tried to improve Chinese teachers' social status by various measures. A national "Teachers' Day" is fixed for September 10 of each year; various titles are given to teachers to recognize their excellence in teaching and services to the students; and the government-controlled media repeatedly urge all members in the society to respect teachers. Despite that, Chinese teachers have a social status much lower than many social groups such as government officials and entrepreneurs; the teaching profession is generally despised; and teacher education colleges have had great difficulty recruiting outstanding students. China, known for her long history of valuing education and respecting teachers, has undergone significant social and educational changes, particularly since the Chinese communist party came to power. What has happened?

This paper will look at Chinese teachers' position in the communist political system, and will probe such fundamental issues as teachers' identity in a political system, the relationship between teachers and the state, the correspondence between politics and teachers' social status, and the extent of their authority in the classroom. In the North American context, political influence on teachers' personal and professional lives is much less direct than that in China. Adopting a historical perspective to look at the overwhelming control of the political system over Chinese teachers, the goal of this paper is to help educators reflect on the undemocratic practices in their own political and educational system, and maybe become more appreciative of the freedom and independence they now enjoy.

Data for this paper come from the author's direct living experience in China for over twenty years and teaching there for three. She benefits from continuous and often lengthy discussion with many Chinese teachers at primary, secondary, and university level. Her long research interests in analyzing China's political and educational system also provide her with understanding on this topic.<sup>1</sup>

### Teachers' Class Identity Under the Dictatorship of the Proletariat

To understand Chinese teachers' identity and their relationship with the state, one has to look at the institutional set-up of the Chinese communist system. In 1949, when the People's Republic of China was founded, the dictatorship of the proletariat was established as the founding principal for the system. In fact, the dictatorship of the proletariat can be viewed as both an ideology and a social system. As an ideology, it is advocated by the ideas of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Zedong at different periods of time and in various circumstances. They advocate that in order to maintain communist control at the beginning stage of a socialist system, suppressive means, and even violent means, are necessary for the new system to differentiate enemies and friends, and to strike down any resistance from enemies of the proletariat. As a social system, the dictatorship of the proletariat is formed of court, army, police, and the government-controlled media, working together to maintain communist totalitarian control by effectively and "justifiably" suppressing any opposition forces. Marx, Lenin, and Mao all adopt a deterministic view about people's class nature and class stand, claiming that all individuals have to belong to certain classes, that their attitudes and behaviors under a socialist system depend largely on their class background.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese teachers' identity was defined against this background. In 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took over from the Nationalist Party (Guomindang), it started to categorize most Chinese people into two major classes, namely the "working class" and their "class enemies." The "working class" was composed of workers, peasants, revolutionary soldiers, and revolutionary cadres, and the "class enemies" included landlords, rich farmers, capitalists, Guomindang soldiers, counterrevolutionaries, bad elements, Rightists, traitors, and spies. Property ownership and political affiliation before 1949, and political beliefs over time were the three criteria for the classification. Overall, "class enemies" were those who before 1949 had possessed a certain amount of land or capital or other properties, or who had affiliated with Guomindang during this period. "Class enemies" also included people who in the socialist stage, regardless of their class background, had posed doubts about the system or had taken action against the Chinese Communist Party. They were labeled by various political movements as revisionists, capitalist roaders, bad elements, reactionaries, reactionary authority in the intellectual fields, Rightists, and the like. The category of "working class" was for people who possessed little or no property in the pre-1949 period; these people who at different stages of the socialist system had unconditionally supported communist control were also categorized as the "proletarian class."

Once people were categorized, the communist government was justified to use court, army, police, the media, and various political movements to control and persecute the "class enemies." Under this system, therefore, from 1949 to 1976 millions of people, totaling about 10-20 percent of the population, were categorized as "class enemies" and were thrown into jails, taken to the public to be struggled with,<sup>3</sup> and consistently discriminated against in terms of education and employment opportunities, mate choice, job promotion, and, above all, political treatment. In their daily life, they were treated as people of no value and respect. Their "class nature" was said to be "anti-socialist" and therefore, they were doomed to "struggle" and be punished severely by the iron fist of the proletariat. Similar treatment was extended to their family members or even friends, as they were believed to have inherited the "class nature" of the "class enemies." The government-controlled mass media waged constant campaigns against these people, portraying them as evil and ugly, charging them with many crimes they had not committed. Protests, if ever dared by these people, were brutally cracked down, either in the form of death or jail, or massive "class struggle" meetings, or much more severe discrimination in their daily lives.

Teachers, together with writers, journalists, artists, and scientists, were categorized as a class who belonged to neither "the working class" nor "the class enemies of the proletariat." They were called "intellectuals that can be re-educated," treated as an intermediate group who wavered between the "working class" and their "class enemies." They were perceived able to serve the socialist system if they would completely adjust their values, ideas, and attitudes to the side of the working class. However, in the communist deterministic class point of view, teachers were believed to have taken up so much bad influence from their bourgeoisie and intellectual backgrounds that even upon vigorous confession and indoctrination they would not be able to shorten their distance with the working class. Professionally, teachers' independent thinking, questioning attitude, and strong desire for freedom were deemed to be particularly dangerous in the communists' efforts to build up a totalitarian system in China.

Chinese teachers were thus thrown into vulnerable positions, being held as politically untrustworthy. This conflicted with their roles as the basic implementors of the educational policies for the socialist nation, with their social function being to give education, training, and instruction in the communist spirit to the young generation (Paine, 1991). Their bourgeois family background and the education they received under the Guomindang regime, which had inevitably "marked" their beliefs and behaviors, "discredited" them from carrying out the important task of training socialist successors. Fundamental distrust against them as human beings and the nature of their profession subjected them in the ensuing decades to great ups and downs in their social status and authority in the classroom.

In the following section, we will give a brief overview of the political treatment of Chinese teachers under the dictatorship of the proletariat. We intend to argue that Chinese teachers' low social status and lack of power in the classroom is inherent in China's communist system, and that political distrust has profoundly changed people's attitudes toward the teaching profession.

### 1950s: The Anti-Rightist Movement

The year 1957 was one in which many Chinese teachers experienced great enthusiasm, a tremendous sense of loss, bitter distrust, and severe damage to their political identity. When the People's Republic was founded in 1949, most teachers embraced the new system with full enthusiasm and great trust, just like many other social groups. Fed up with the corruption and cruelty of the Guomindang, they wished that the Chinese communist party would bring China a better future. In order to fit in with the new system, they took an active part in the thought-reform movement, which was waged by the government to remold their mind by washing away old ideas and to replace them with new communist beliefs. Like millions of other Chinese,<sup>4</sup> teachers were formed into small study groups, conducting self-criticism and mutual criticism. They exposed their inner thoughts to the group for criticism, taking great pain to shorten any distance they might have with communist values and beliefs. They studied party documents with great sincerity, waging attacks on their own past and their independent thinking. Intensive indoctrination of the communist values and beliefs brought a large number of teachers to a total trust of the good wills of the communist government in building China into a strong and prosperous nation.

This trust led teachers to believe in the government when there was a campaign in 1957 to "let hundreds of flowers bloom and hundreds of schools of thought contend," with the goal to "broaden freedom inside the camp of the people in accordance with the consolidation of the people's regime" (Lu Dingyi, 1956). Encouraged as well as demanded by the party to participate, teachers attended numerous meetings, pointed out mistakes made by the party and gave suggestions on how to improve the party and the political system. Convinced that their criticism was welcome, many teachers gave frank and sometimes sharp opinions. But within a few months in the same year, the campaign turned out to be the communist government's tactic to do what a Chinese proverb describes as "luring the snake out of its hole and chopping off its head." Deep distrust for teachers convinced the party that the teachers' responses were attempts to overthrow the communist control, and an "Anti-Rightist movement" was waged throughout the country for large scale purges. Consequently, about a million teachers and other intellectuals were officially labeled as "rightist", overnight

shuffled into the camp of the “class enemies.” “Rightist” became their political identity, which was written into their personal files,<sup>5</sup> subjecting them to discrimination and torture wherever they went. As a measure of punishment, “rightist teachers” were instantly stripped of their status in the society and authority in the classroom. A large number of them, no longer allowed to teach, were sent to do dirty, heavy physical labor with a much lower salary. Many were dispatched to labor camps in remote areas, suffering extremely inhumane treatment both physically and psychologically. The respect they once enjoyed as teachers was replaced by curses or even physical abuse from people around them and from their former students, who accused them of their “evil” attempts to smear the image of the party and to “want to overthrow the government so loved by the people.” Families broke up, many people committed suicide, and children of the “rightist teachers” were looked down upon by their peers, denied admission to prestigious student organizations, refused by higher education institutions, abused by children in the neighborhood, and often assigned to do low status and poorly paid jobs after graduation.<sup>6</sup>

Teachers’ attitudes and behaviors underwent tremendous changes after this event. Fear and caution replaced unconditional trust and belief in the government. Self-defense became the top priority when they were to give opinions on certain issues, either in formal settings or in daily conversation among teachers. The iron fist of the dictatorship of the proletariat was so powerful that they had to seek survival through conformity and obedience. The movement “proved” to the communist government, led by Chairman Mao Zedong, that Chinese teachers were unreliable, and hostility toward them escalated. However in the larger society, the teaching profession was still generally held in awe, based on the fact that the Anti-Rightist movement was largely confined to the circle of intellectuals, and that many ordinary people did not have direct contact with them. In the classroom, teachers who escaped from being categorized as “rightists” still enjoyed some respect from students. For example, they could, as characteristic of traditional Chinese education, discipline students, and students were still urged to “respect the principal and the teachers,” “to obey the instructions,” and “to listen attentively to the teachers’ instruction.”<sup>7</sup> Despite these, they had very limited power with regard to what should be taught, since they all had to use the government-designed curriculum and to follow the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education. They had to repeat the government rhetoric and avoid giving personal views throughout classroom teaching, which was especially true in social science courses designed for indoctrination of communist ideologies. Political reliability became important for teaching certain subjects. For example, teachers who taught politics had to come from the working class background and had to have gained special trust from the party.

### 1960s: "To Be Red and Expert" and the Cultural Revolution

In the early 1960s, academic excellence was still the stress in the school system, as it was in the Chinese tradition, and a university degree was still one of the most important means for people to gain access to financial security, high social status, and political power. Not questioning the content, teachers who taught subject matter carefully, who were able to help students memorize large amounts of materials and pass the annual national college and university entrance exam were greatly respected by parents and students. In fact the emphasis on high scores was so overwhelming that even today one can still hear people admiring these teachers' ability to help students master textbook knowledge during the early 1960s. But this emphasis was gradually overturned after 1962, as Chairman Mao Zedong became increasingly preoccupied with the danger of "class enemies" undermining the socialist system in and outside China, particularly within the school system. Reflected in education, the government's educational policies began a shift of emphasis from academic excellence to political reliability. Students were urged to be both "red and expert". Good class origin, deemed a condition for one to become "red" or to become "firm revolutionary warriors and successors to communism,"<sup>8</sup> became an important criterion for admission to higher education. As Chairman Mao Zedong's emphasis on class struggle between the proletariat and their "enemies" became more and more intensive,<sup>9</sup> political reliability became the single most important criterion for selection to higher education, and children of "class enemy" family background and intellectual family background were denied the right to higher education (Lin, 1991; Rosen, 1982). School activities started to focus on educating students to develop desirable class feelings and class struggle viewpoints. Veteran workers, peasants, and communist party members were invited to school to help students acquire correct class standing by recounting their sufferings of oppression and exploitation in the pre-1949 period. Students visited rural and urban areas to "conduct vivid class education" and to inculcate a strong sense of identification with the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>10</sup>

The belief that one's class nature determined whether or not one could become a "red" person caused a severe dilemma for teachers. Most teachers dared no longer reward academic excellence, as those who did were accused of necessarily ignoring students' political development. Their "lack" of working class feeling as an intellectual intermediate class disqualified them, as indicated by the government's policies, to train students to become "red." This political "deficiency" rapidly undermined teachers' authority in the classroom. In the height of emphasizing "redness," many students challenged their teachers' political reliability in the classroom. Teachers were swept off their feet when they were charged that "by nature" they could not be right. This distrust was even more evident at the leader-

ship level. For example, many teachers made repeated applications, some for ten or even twenty years, to become a party member, yet very few were ever accepted. The distrust was so deeply rooted that no matter what they did teachers could hardly gain any better treatment.

Before long, teachers were plunged into a new political disaster, this time life-threatening for many. In 1966, the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution was started by Chairman Mao Zedong. The movement began by purging Wu Han, a historian who was accused of criticizing Chairman Mao Zedong implicitly in his play *Hai Rui Dismissed From Office*. It soon spread to schools all over China. Supported by their political idol Chairman Mao, the Red Guards, who were secondary school and college students, waged massive, destructive attacks on teachers, who as a whole were labeled "reactionary authority in the intellectual field." A large number of teachers were taken to the public along with other "class enemies," humiliated, yelled at, beaten up, or even tortured to death. In a middle school in Beijing, according to a teacher's recourt to the author, five teachers from a landlord background were beaten to death. The principal of the school, whose legs were broken from being pushed to fall from a high building, was forced to confess his "crimes" right there for hours without any kind of treatment. In the county where the author is from, more than one hundred teachers were tortured to death. Four of them were forced to sit on a pack of explosives and were ordered to light the explosives themselves. "With a tremendous sound, there were only legs and arms among the trees and on the roof," described a teacher who was crippled by his students. He remarked to the author that "an underground high school could be built in the county."

From another point of view, the student violence might be seen as a backfire on teachers' lack of authority in school. Teachers had no power over what should be taught in the classroom, and through teaching the government-designed curriculum, they had socialized their students to be extremely violent toward the "class enemies" and unquestioningly obedient toward their political idol Chairman Mao Zedong and his Communist Party. They had inculcated absolute beliefs in the communist ideology, particularly in the theory for the dictatorship of the proletariat. They had taught the students to hate the "class enemies" so much that they should do what Chairman Mao instructed them: "Knock them to the ground and stamp a foot on them." It was found that this kind of teaching had driven millions of students to commit numerous crimes believing that they were fighting for an ideal communist society (Lin, 1991).

Violence during the early part of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1968) disrupted school orders and all schools in China were closed for more than two years. In 1968, when schools were reopened, teachers were organized to take part in intensive class struggle meetings and political study

sessions, criticizing and exposing each other, studying Chairman Mao's works, and digging out "remnant class enemies." Many were sent to re-education camps, known as "May 7 cadres schools," where they were expected to cultivate proletarian class feelings by living and laboring like peasants, reading the works of Chairman Mao, constructing their own dwelling, planting the crops necessary to feed themselves and so on (Cleaverley, 1985). According to many reports, teachers and other intellectuals were badly treated in the centers. They were regarded more like criminals guilty of ideological faults than like respected teachers.

### **1970s: Going Against the Tide, Society as Classroom**

The 1970s arrived with continuous repression for all people in the "class enemies" category, and more so for teachers. A series of campaigns took place, aiming at a systematic, fundamental denial of teachers' social status and authority in the classroom. One was the "Criticizing Lin Biao and Confucius Movement" (1971-1973), which featured big character posters and countless meetings in schools that opened fire at traditional values such as "the teaching profession should be greatly honored" (*shi dao zhun yian*). Confucius as a teacher was criticized as a greedy, reactionary figure preaching poisonous feudalist values and beliefs, wanting to pull history back to reactionary stages.

The second was the so-called going-against-the-tide campaign (1973-1976), which advocated a revolt against teachers' authority in the classroom. A twelve-year-old young girl, Huang Shuai, was established as a "going against the tide" hero, questioning teachers' authority over students.<sup>11</sup> The government-controlled media, as in other movements, published numerous articles praising students and encouraging them to rise against their teachers, attacking teachers for wanting students to become their "slaves" or obedient "sheep." They were also criticized on a wide range of issues. For example, an article in *People's Daily* (1974, p. 2) charged that teachers "have used exams as their secret weapon in controlling the students, and they have used 'marks' as a weapon to restrict the students who have offended them." Disciplining students was elevated to the level of "a struggle of political lines."

These two campaigns did great damage to teachers as professionals. For the first time, all teachers were put in opposition to students, with students being supported by the radical elements within the communist party. To "go against the tide," students were encouraged to overthrow teachers' authority by becoming disobedient students unrestricted by rules and unconcerned about school work. The author remembers that, as acts of disobedience, her classmates spit on teachers' chairs, made loud noises

throughout teachers' lectures, burned English textbooks in front of the English teacher, cursed teachers with filthy words, and even fought with them. On one occasion, the author's classmates put several brooms on the top of a classroom door. When the math teacher opened the door, all the brooms, along with a mist of dust, fell on him. The students applauded excitedly, while the teacher stood there silent, his face red with anger. Despite all these, teachers dared not discipline students, which fanned up more mischievous behaviors.

Under tremendous pressure, teachers with a strong sense of responsibility became greatly discouraged; many totally gave up on their students. Some tried to persuade their students to learn something useful, but they felt powerless when students refused to listen. The following paragraph indicates something about teachers' attitudes at the time:

The idea of 'absolute authority of a teacher' having been criticized, a situation has evolved in which some teachers do not concern themselves with things emerging from among the students that are incompatible with Mao Zedong Thought. Taking an evasive attitude, they try to transfer from one unit to another. In doing the classroom work, some teachers are not resolute in supporting what is correct and resisting and criticizing what is wrong. They just want to push responsibility onto student officers so that they themselves will not be held responsible. ... Some teachers act according to the doctrine of the mean with regard to problems among students because they fear that students may rise up to rebel against them and criticize them for controlling, restricting, and repressing the students. They also fear that they may once again make mistakes involving the ideas of 'absolute authority of a teacher', and get themselves into trouble. They fear this and that. In a word, they fear that revolutionary action will be taken with regard to their bourgeois world outlook. (*Henan Radio*, 1974)

This movement completely undermined students' respect for teachers, and academic excellence became institutionally uprooted. Before the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976, many schools had stopped administering tests to students. The national college and university entrance exam, once the base for teachers to have certain authority in the classroom, was replaced by a new system in which admission to colleges and universities was based on young people's political performance and working attitudes (the students, instead of directly going from high school to colleges, had to have worked at least two years before they were eligible), and particularly on recommendation by workers and peasants in their work units. This new

practice changed students' learning attitudes dramatically, and most became uninterested in school. Students who still paid some attention to school work were often ridiculed as teachers' "slaves," wanting to be "white experts" as contrary to the desirable "red revolutionists." More than ever students lost the motivation to learn, and never had students learned so little after staying in school for ten years, from primary level to the end of secondary school. This generation was later on called "the lost generation."

Teachers' authority was further denied by the government's call for students to go out of school and learn with workers and peasants. Working-class feeling, seen as vital for the persistence of the dictatorship of the proletariat, was believed to be learned not in the classroom but by working side by side with the workers and peasants. As a response to the government's policy many schools moved their classrooms to factories and to the farm field, and students took harvesting rice or making machine parts as the most important thing they had to learn. In school administration, veteran workers and peasants, who might have received very little education, were brought into schools to become party secretaries and principals. Teachers were under great pressure to give their whole-hearted support to all these changes. There were reports that even though they were very ill, they forced themselves to work for fear of charges such as "refusing to learn from the working class."

Coupled with this trend were the massive efforts by the government-controlled media to portray teachers as ideologically backward and professionally unable. There was a movie called *A Breakaway* (from capitalist reactionary education) (1975) in which teachers were described as conservative, impractical people, falling behind the heated revolution going on in China. The movie had a scene in which a teacher was seriously lecturing to students about the functions of a horse tail, which the peasants could not care less about. This scene gave the impression that teachers were ridiculous, stupid people, blind to the needs of the "working class," having no idea about what kind of knowledge was valuable. The message transmitted to the public was that teachers, instead of teaching others, had to be taught by workers and peasants. Teachers were seen by the society as dangerous, rude, and stupid, and their social status was so low in the first part of the 1970s that teacher abuse happened frequently and it was considered a shame to be a teacher.

### **1980s: Engineer of the Human Soul?**

The Cultural Revolution ended with the death of Chairman Mao Zedong in 1976. In 1977 the national college and university entrance exam was restored. In 1978 an "open door" policy was adopted and an economic

reform was launched by Deng Xiaoping, first in rural China, then in cities. Since then, many social, political, and economic changes have taken place, which have had great direct impact on Chinese teachers.

One significant change was the modification of the theory for the dictatorship of the proletariat. As a measure by Deng's government to correct the excessiveness of the Cultural Revolution and to revive what Harding called the "decayed totalitarianism" (Harding, 1986, pp. 13-38), people in the category of "class enemies" were "uncapped" between 1978-1979 and were supposed to be treated equally as the working class. The argument is that after thirty years of socialism they had been reformed by the system, and that stormy class struggle was no longer necessary, even though it would exist here or there for a long period of time. As a result, teachers were re-categorized as "a part of the working class", finally achieving an equal political status with the working class. The government then adopted a series of policies pushing toward economic reform, aiming at realizing modernization in the country's agriculture, industry, national defense, and science and technology. In an attempt to motivate teachers and other intellectuals to join in this effort, a similarly intensive media campaign was waged, calling for the improvement of teachers' social status by recognizing the importance of teachers' work and by improving their living and working conditions. For the first time, teachers' horrible living conditions were revealed and severe physical abuse to teachers was reported. Teachers as a professional group were praised as "the engineer of the human soul," gardeners taking care of the flowers of the country. Model teachers were identified and widely publicized on TV and in newspapers, material rewards were given out to teachers of excellence. In policy, efforts were also made to improve teachers' housing conditions, and several salary increases were granted to teachers nationwide.

Simultaneously, the restoration of the national college and university entrance exam improved teachers' situation in the classroom. Once again they were able to restore order in the classroom, discipline students, and have some authority in interpreting subject matters. With higher education becoming again the main ladder to social mobility, student motivation to learn improved. Teacher abuse happened much less in this period than in the first part of the 1970s, and good teachers were especially respected. When working as an English teacher in China, the author was supplied with a thermos of hot water for each class session, a gesture by the students to show gratitude for the teachers' work. Many students became their teachers' good friends, sharing their secrets with them, seeking advice, and coming back to visit them after graduation. Despite this, teachers' roles in the classroom are still mainly confined to indoctrinating students with a preconceived ideology, having no control over what should be taught. They

still have great fear in giving their personal points of view in teaching, which inevitably hamper their ability to challenge students to think independently and reflectively.

While teachers gained back some respect and autonomy in the classroom, improvements in teachers' social status were more symbolic than real. The economic reform in general improved teachers' living conditions, but the escalating inflation often put teachers in financial difficulty. Chinese teachers have a fixed salary, which is low compared to people in government agencies, in enterprises, and even to peasants. In order to supplement their income, many have to teach after school and during the weekends. In the political hierarchy, there is almost no avenue for them to advance. Professionally, most teachers have very heavy workloads, teaching large classes and working long hours. All these make teaching an undesirable, low-status profession. In fact, many teachers try so hard to leave the profession that the government made a series of policies in the 1980s to restrict them from doing so. Excellent students refuse to attend teachers' colleges or universities. Parents want good teachers to teach their children but refuse to allow their children to become teachers. Disdain for teaching is also evident among communist cadres. In a widely circulated joke, a county head once said to a teacher: "You work hard and some day I will promote you to be a cashier of a grocery store."

Besides "lack of job mobility, poor pay, the binding rule of seniority within the teaching hierarchy, and a weak reward structure for innovative teachers" (Delany & Paine, 1991), Chinese teachers have remained politically vulnerable in the period since 1978. Under the government's Four Cardinal Principles, China is to insist on the dictatorship of the proletariat, the leadership of the Chinese communist party, a socialist orientation, and Marxism, Leninism and Mao Zedong Thoughts as the guiding ideology. The fact that the dictatorship of the proletariat is still the founding principle keeps teachers under the tight control of the communist system. This was most evident after the 1989 student movement. Teachers were openly or implicitly blamed in the government's media as having taught students "liberal ideologies" and schools were ordered to spend more time on teaching Chinese communist history in order to inculcate loyalty toward the present government. In all, Chinese teachers in the 1980s still had little control over their political identity and their professional life, and their status and positions shift with every change in the political system. Ultimately, as employees of the state, they are only tools for the government to maintain and reinforce dictatorship control.

In the 1990s, the prospect for Chinese teachers may be two-fold: in their personal life, they may be worse off with the rising cost of living and

the increased gap of earning compared with other social groups; in their professional life, however, they may enjoy greater autonomy with the government continuing to push for economic reform, which essentially undermines the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) totalitarian grip on the Chinese society and the school system. In the process of education slowly orienting toward serving the new market-based economy, the efforts toward decentralization (Lin, 1993) in the 1980s may start to bear some fruit. In fact, teachers are beginning to have certain autonomy in the school system. Teachers nowadays have a vote for selecting their principal, and they are more than ever involved in school management. It is likely that in the 1990s teachers may eventually stand out as a professional group other than political tools. As some researchers have pointed out, the depoliticization of the Chinese society (Whyte, 1992) is reflecting on the school system (Sautman, 1991), where the government can no longer require complete and unconditional compliance among teachers.

### Conclusion

This paper examines the changes of Chinese teachers' social status and authority in the classroom under the system of dictatorship of the proletariat. It argues that political control over Chinese teachers is inherent in the communist political system, which features treating teachers not as independent, respectable beings, but as categories to be controlled and as tools to be used. This situation, though improved, continues to be serious, particularly when the Chinese government is refusing to join in the trend toward democracy and still holding on to the so-called Four Cardinal Principles. Problems teachers have encountered since the economic reform have only worsened their situation. In all, the cause that led to the Chinese teachers' low social status and their lack of power in the classroom has to be traced to the very ideology followed by the CCP.

Chinese teachers' experiences indicate that respect for teachers as human beings and as professionals must start with the founding principle of a political system and the institutions that are set up to implement them. It is essential that equality for all should be at the core of any social and political system. Freedom from political labels and from fear of persecution are the primary conditions for teachers to become independent, critical thinkers who can teach students to respect each other, and to bring changes to a society in a positive, constructive way. Teachers need to be recognized as free and respectable beings in order to be empowered. In this respect, Chinese teachers' dilemma should serve as a strong reminder that fundamental human rights have to be fought for and guarded continuously, and teachers will not be respected and empowered if the purpose of education is for political control instead of for the common good of human society.

Fundamental changes to Chinese teachers' social status and their situation in the classroom may yet have to come with deepening economic reform taking place in China now and an overhaul of the present oppressive political system. In fact, the economic reform is gradually undermining the totalitarian control of the communist party. Chinese people today have more autonomy over their lives than ever before. In the political system, different voices are continuously breaking out of the thick cover of the system. In education, though some scholars still echo support for the government's policies to serve a distinct political purpose (Zhang Chengxian, 1989; Liu Bin, 1989), many are refusing to see schools as merely reacting passively to the political system. Rather, education is seen as multi-dimensional, influenced by multiple forces, and serving many purposes of modern society (Xiao Zongliu, 1990). Even the backward turn in the government's stressing the importance of political control after the 1989 student movement has failed to reverse the trend effectively. These changes in the Chinese society allows the author to end this article with an optimistic note that sooner or later the totalitarian control in China will break down and that Chinese teachers will eventually become respected, free and powerful citizens and professionals.

## NOTES

1. The research findings are published in both books by Lin (1991, 1993).
2. For detailed treatment please refer to Lin (1991).
3. These include taking the "class enemies" to "class struggle" meetings which were held very often, shouting at them, beating them to the ground, forcing them to confess their "crimes;" in daily life this included ordering "class enemies" to do the dirtiest and lowest work at the lowest pay or no pay at all, cursing and discriminating against them.
4. For a good account of the thought reform movement, please refer to Chen, T. H. E. (1960). *Thought Reform of the Chinese Intellectuals*. Hong Kong: University Press. For a detailed description of small study groups, refer to Whyte, M. K. (1974). *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
5. Every Chinese had a personal file. The file recorded the individual's class origin and past performance and contained comments by party secretaries or personnel directors. Usually, the individual did not know what was written in the file, and wherever the individual went, the file would follow him or her. The treatment of this individual was often decided by what was written in the file. In all, class origin was the first thing communist cadres looked for in order to differentiate treatment.

6. For a detailed account of this kind of experience, refer to Heng, L., & Shapiro, J. (1983). *Son of the Revolution*. New York: Knopf.
7. Shanghai, *Wen Hui Bao*. (1955, February 26). Rules of Conduct for Primary School Students. Also Beijing, *Guangming Daily*. (1955, June 8). Rules of Conduct for Middle School Students.
8. Peking Young Communist League Committee and Young Communist League Committee of Qinghua University. (1962, December 8). Call for Separate Forums on Redness and Expertness. Beijing, *China Youth Daily*.
9. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Mao had developed extreme sensitivity toward changes within the communist party. There appeared in the communist world some new ideas which demanded breaking through old confinements and becoming more open to the western world. Yugoslavia took the lead, immediately rejected by the communist world. When Nikita Khrushchev came to power in the Soviet Union, he offered some compromises with the western world. Mao regarded this as a rank betrayal of communism and organized a large critical campaign against these "revisionist lines." He expressed himself as more firmly convinced than ever that "class struggle must be talked about year after year, month after month and day after day." What happened in the Soviet Union made Mao believe that Chinese education was facing a great danger, that the younger generation might have lost their class stand and become "revisionists" of socialism. In a talk with Edgar Snow in 1970, Mao maintained that before the Cultural Revolution, all primary schools, secondary schools, and universities were controlled by teachers left over from the Guomindang regime; that in the academic world, power had been taken over by capitalist intellectuals. These people, with the deepening of socialist revolution, became more and more resistant and therefore their anti-socialist true face showed more and more clearly. As a reflection of this worry, the emphasis on "redness" became a tactic of strengthening ideological control and differentiating treatment to rekindle enthusiasm in socialism and to foster strong "class feeling" among the younger generation of the working class.
10. Beijing, *People's Daily*. (1963, July 14). Primary and Middle School in Beijing and Wuhan Guide Students to Compare the Bitterness of the Old Society with the Sweetness of the New Society; and also Receive the Stimulation of Class Education and Sow the Seeds of Revolutionary Thoughts. Chinese Communist Party Beijing University Committee. (1964, June 14). Give the Students Education in the Revolutionary World View, Starting with Class Education. Beijing, *Guangming Daily*.
11. Huang Shuai, a 12-year-old primary school student, had written remarks in her diary criticizing her teacher for her authoritarian manner. When her teacher saw the remarks (as the diary was part of her homework), the teacher criticized her publicly in the class and had, as Jonathan Unger put it, "in the

time-tested way of a Chinese classroom" (Unger, 1982: 180), organized students to criticize her in a small study group. Huang Shuai was unhappy and she wrote to the *People's Daily* asking: "What serious mistakes have I made? Are we children of Mao Zedong's time still supposed to be slaves to the teachers' absolute authority created by the old educational system?" This was taken by the "gang of four," a group of party radicals, as a good chance for waging a "revolution in education." Huang Shuai's letter and extracts from her diary were put on the front page of the *People's Daily* (December 28, 1973), the most important newspaper in China which is called the "throat and tongue" of the party.

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