Turning Peasants into Modern Chinese Citizens: “Population Quality” Discourse, Demographic Transition and Primary Education*

Rachel Murphy

ABSTRACT The all-embracing discourse of population quality (suzhi) is put to work through rural primary schools in ways that help state institutions implement policies such as accelerating demographic transition, restructuring the education system, professionalizing labour markets, promoting agricultural skills training, instituting economic liberalism and carrying out patriotic education. Suzhi discourse facilitates policy implementation in four ways. First, it imbues disparate policies with seeming coherence. Secondly, by articulating a diverse set of policies through suzhi discourse, including state retreat from welfare provisioning, state institutions can be seen to be working to improve people’s well-being. Thirdly, in making people responsible for raising their own quality, the need to improve suzhi is an explanation and a prescription when individuals are adversely affected by policies. Finally, suzhi discourse encourages individuals to regulate their conduct in accordance with the political drift of society. By enfolding suzhi norms into identity formation, the education system shapes each individual’s ongoing process of “becoming” in ways that parallel the nation’s modernization, thereby reducing the costs of policy enforcement.

This article examines how China’s goals for rural modernization are framed in terms of “population quality,” in particular, how the rationale of population quality is used in the context of primary education. This use of “population quality” resonates with the definition of discourse as a system of meaning that embodies a way of thinking at a point in time and is produced through articulatory practices – practices which establish a relationship among and between objects and actions such that their meaning is altered.1 A discourse originates from multiple sources, is manifest through a range of texts and practices, and operates across institutions.2 Even where texts and practices occur in different settings they can still be considered part of a single discourse if they “refer to the

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same object, share the same style and support a common administrative or political drift or pattern.” In China, the discourse of population quality spans disparate policy areas such as reproduction and child rearing, school modernization, state retreat from welfare provisioning, and the promotion of economic competition. Like all discourses, “quality” places valuations on states of being. This is normalizing because such valuations cause people to regulate their conduct in ways that move them towards a positively valued state, for example being high rather than low quality.4

The following discussion considers how “quality” discourse encourages parents, teachers and students to regulate their conduct and that of others in ways that facilitate the implementation of often contradictory modernizing policies. Here, it is important to be clear about the meaning of “quality.” In common usage, “quality” equates with “goodness,” for example, a “high quality education” is a “good education.” However in this article a more particular meaning is intended, that represented by the Chinese term suzhi. Literally “essentialized quality,” suzhi is an amorphous concept that refers to the innate and nurtured physical, intellectual and ideological characteristics of a person.5

The all-embracing concept of suzhi emerged only as recently as the early 1980s when China was embarking on national modernization and opening up to the outside world.6 Previously, terms such as zhiliang (a measured standard) and wenhua shuiping (cultural level) were more common in discussions of quality. Historical antecedents for suzhi can be seen in Confucian teachings that each individual is malleable, trainable and obliged to self-cultivate and that all subjects share in responsibility for the fate of the empire.7 Further influences came during the 19th century when China’s encounters with colonial powers led intellectuals to embrace Social Darwinian ideas and to conclude that national survival depended on improving the quality of the citizens.8 A suzhi-like approach can also be seen in Mao Zedong’s pronouncements about promoting the all-round physical, aesthetic and moral development of individuals and his belief that behaviour indicates ideological attitude. Marxist theory has also influenced suzhi with the belief that the economy and culture can be engineered to produce a utopian future. In the terminology of Marxist theory suzhi embodies both “base” and “superstructure”: economically

6. Ann Anagnost stresses the role of global interactions, past and present, in the production of discourse about the quality of the national character.
productive labour and cultural aspects of knowledge, ideology and behaviour."9

Su zu hi derives part of its ideological potency through its reinforcement of related systems of valuation already embedded within Chinese development discourse, such as town versus country, developed versus backward, prosperous versus poor, civilized versus barbarian, and to have culture (you wenhua) versus to be without culture (mei wenhua). So although concerns about su zu hi pertain to the entire population, groups in lower valued situations are seen to need special remedial attention.10 Such anxiety about the backwardness of particular groups is not unique to China. Many scholars document how in a variety of social and historical contexts, nation-states perceive a problem in the "backwardness" of certain groups, in this case rural people, and designate a pivotal role for schools in "civilizing" them.11

In rural schools su zu hi discourse can be seen operating in two domains: "population quality" (renkou su zu hi) and "quality education" (suzhi jiaoyu). "Population quality" refers to the education and health attributes of the population, sometimes called "human capital."12 Chinese policy documents state that national modernization depends on accelerating quantity–quality transition in the countryside because a large low-quality rural populace hinders progression from tradition, poverty and agrarianism to modernity, prosperity and industrialism.13 These documents advise government organs and schools to encourage rural parents to have fewer children,14 thereby allowing increased investment per child. The resulting improved life opportunities and reduced infant mortality are said to enable parents to realize their reproductive goals – such as security in old age and emotional satisfaction – through fewer children.

“Quality education” refers to a curriculum and method of instruction that extends beyond passing exams and rote learning to emphasizing creativity, civic responsibility and overall personal development. Reforms to promote quality education focus on encouraging self-expression, manual dexterity, life skills appropriate to the local environment, and extra-curricula activities such as music, sport and art. Suzhi education requires better-qualified teachers and smaller class sizes; of course this involves more resources per pupil, and so connects with the discussion of population quality. Although suzhi education reforms are being pursued nation-wide, planners see their implementation in rural settings as posing particular challenges, and these are explored later.

Suzhi discourse is central to the continuing legitimacy of the party-state and its policies in rural areas in four respects. First, the Party apparatus has positioned itself at the helm of a developmental state but is retreating from directly providing for the well-being of its citizens. This retreat is manifest in the erosion of collective welfare, the fall in state funding for rural health and education, the increasing exposure of villagers to the vagaries of labour markets, and the disappearance of guaranteed prices for farm products, particularly following China’s decision to enter the WTO. In this environment, suzhi discourse moves the onus of provision on to individuals by relating their well-being to their suzhi. Meanwhile the state’s role becomes one of supporting individuals in their efforts to raise their suzhi: slogans on village walls urge farmers to “have fewer children, improve population suzhi and charge towards xiaokang (a comfortable standard of living).” So, despite its retreat, the party-state continues to be seen as developmental.

Secondly, the legitimacy of the party-state rests on its historic promise to improve the condition of the population. Maintaining legitimacy on this basis requires being seen to have a coherent plan for ongoing national development. Suzhi brings disparate policies together by linking them to a modernization teleology. For example, policy documents note that birth planning leads to reductions in class sizes which increases educational quality which contributes to modernization which propels fertility decline.


Su**zhi** discourse also serves to maintain state legitimacy because it deflects attention away from inequalities arising from policy biases by explaining the socio-economic position of individuals in terms of their **suzhi**.19 Finally, because **suzhi** touches on all aspects of life, state objec-
tives are infused into the ways that people conduct their everyday lives. Through a range of discursive techniques – knowledge, texts, systems of judgement, buildings and spaces – **suzhi** shapes the “microphysics”20 of day-to-day existence: the mundane practices associated with repro-
duction, child-rearing, primary education, technical training and labour. So villagers are active in shaping their everyday lives in the name of achieving the state-sanctioned objective of modernization.

Although **suzhi** is central to legitimizing party-state policies, the transfer of responsibility to villagers has an empowering dimension to it. When villagers use **suzhi** discourse themselves, the shift in the position of enunciation from above to below recasts the power relations and nuances associated with it.21 For example, when a village woman talks about establishing a kindergarten to improve the **suzhi** of her children, the power relations are distinctly different from when a cadre laments low quality peasants. But even by resisting the labels imposed by **suzhi**, people still engage with and implicitly accept the **suzhi** perspective, and the unequal power relations that it embodies.22 Hence, despite the potential for empowerment, **suzhi** legitimates a modernization agenda that, on the one hand, intervenes in such intimate spheres of life as reproduction and child-rearing, while on the other, calls on people to take responsibility for their own welfare in a competitive world.

To explore the role of **suzhi** discourse in national modernization, I draw on fieldwork in Rivercounty, Jiangxi province, in China’s south-east interior. Rural households represent over 80 per cent of the population and three-quarters of these rely solely on agriculture for their livelihoods. Despite levels of off-farm activity that are below the provincial average, fertile soil and generous land allocations mean that standards of living in Rivercounty are middling for Jiangxi. The county is neither desperately poor like rural areas in the far west of China nor wealthy like industrializing counties on the coast.

The analysis of how diverse policies are articulated through **suzhi** discourse begins with a background history of education in rural China in general and Rivercounty in particular. It then examines five policy areas in which **suzhi** practices are actualized through schools. The next section considers how **suzhi** helps to accelerate demographic transition from

22. For the life chance implications of labelling, see Jenkins, Social Identity, pp. 22–23. I did not encounter people operating outside the **suzhi** value system by, for example, becoming hooligans: villagers were preoccupied with their livelihoods.
quantity to quality by promoting the good parenthood norms of having fewer children and investing more in their education. The article then discusses how the need for suzhi education justifies school restructuring and modernization. It next looks at the case of teachers to show how suzhi is used to explain negative outcomes when people face various forms of competition, and to indicate what they must do to improve their situation. The final section considers the role of suzhi discourse in determining what kind of education is appropriate for rural people, for example training in farming skills. It also considers how rural people resist being positioned as the subjects of development. The conclusion considers the role of schools and suzhi discourse in turning peasants into modern patriotic citizens.

**Historical Background to Rural Education**

Rural education under the Chinese Communist Party has always been characterized by tension between “popular,” “revolutionary” and “quantity” approaches, and regularized, meritocratic quality approaches. For many years this tension has been expressed through the side-by-side existence of community run (minban) schools and regularized state schools.

Minban schools were established to give basic education to as many children as possible. The minban teachers were usually literate local farmers with a few months training at a Party teachers’ college. Minban schools were piloted in the revolutionary base areas of Jiangxi during the 1930s and 1940s, but were only established in Rivercounty in 1954 when promoted with the slogan “walking on two legs” – meaning that minban and regular schools would together meet China’s education needs. In the collective era, minban teachers combined teaching with farming and, like other villagers, earned work points to be redeemed for a share of the commune harvest. Additionally in 1965 Rivercounty minban schools adopted a “part-farm part-study” system to reduce the gap between “manual” and “mental” labour, promote farming skills, and achieve economic self-sufficiency for the school. This revolutionary education model has been criticized by the modernizing post-Mao government for its poor quality, but many interviewees who were educated under the system nevertheless felt that it gave them the literacy and numeracy skills needed for farming and keeping accounts.

In contrast, "regular" education emphasized delivering higher quality education to a smaller number of students through a standardized curriculum, exams to determine progression, formalized teacher training, the centralized monitoring of teaching standards and a fixed number of years of schooling. First introduced in the early 1950s, regular schools were state funded and modelled on the Soviet system. Found predominantly in urban areas, this model gained ascendancy when Soviet influence was strong and when technical bureaucrats rather than Maoists had political power. However during the Cultural Revolution (1966–76), in an attempt to remove inequalities from the education system, state schools were converted to minban, and later, at the height of the radicalism, many were closed.28 Following the death of Mao and the fall of the Gang of Four in 1976, schools and universities re-opened, exams were restored, and state supervision of timetables and lesson content was resumed. Also at this time, an elite system of key point junior and senior high schools was established to train academic high achievers for university entrance exams.

In 1979 the strategy for national development shifted decisively from ideological mobilization to making China globally competitive through the Four Modernizations. The communes were dismantled, and the re-emergence of private markets enabled some farmers to partake in local off-farm employment as well as rural–urban labour migration. However in Rivercounty large land allocations and relatively poor communications meant that migration did not start till the early 1990s.

In 1985, anxious that the suzhi of the labour force (80 per cent of whom were farmers) was insufficient to build a globally competitive economy, two key reforms were implemented to help schools meet the challenges of modernization: compulsory education and the decentralization of school management. The 1986 Compulsory Education Law formalized nine years schooling, though allowed governments to move towards this target at the pace permitted by local conditions. So in Rivercounty, economic constraints have meant that there are only five rather than six years of primary schooling. Secondly, school management and fiscal responsibility have been decentralized to local authorities. Decentralized management has enabled school principals to diversify their curriculum depending on local economic and teaching resources. Fiscal decentralization has increased the control of county and township governments over how funds are used, but has also required them to share in the responsibility for raising levels of educational investment.29 In Rivercounty, where there is little revenue from industry or commerce,

footnote continued

fiscal decentralization has led to a funding shortfall. Further decentralization in 1996 has exacerbated the county’s problem and several bankrupt townships have been continually in arrears with the payment of teachers’ wages. Yet despite such setbacks, the education system in Rivercounty has been steadily regularizing, mainly by adopting uniform standards for monitoring teaching quality. Minban teachers have continued to play a role, but are now being phased out in accordance with official guidelines; they were discontinued in Rivercounty in 2000.

**Demographic Transition**

Demographic transition from quantity to quality involves two interdependent goals: increasing the schooling children receive and decreasing family size. Suzhi promotes acceptance of these goals and the policies introduced to achieve them. In particular, suzhi encourages parents to realize their reproductive aspirations through one or two well-educated children. This can be seen in state slogans such as “Promote nine years of education, improve population quality” and “Nine years of hardship for parents is a lifetime of happiness for a child.”

Wider changes arising from modernization also advance demographic transition. Rural parents’ own observations coincide with state assertions about the importance of the next generation’s suzhi for future prosperity. Parents witness the effects of rural–urban labour migration, expansions in communications and the Green Revolution, and realize that their children need education to survive in increasingly competitive labour markets. Official suzhi discourse formalizes these emerging realizations about what it means to be a good parent.30 “Good parents” invest in the quality of their children and this becomes a way of establishing an ongoing reciprocal caring relationship: the “intergenerational contract.”

These changes in parenting culture have brought about an observable acceleration in demographic transition. In Rivercounty, the proportions of children attending and staying in school have increased, while the numbers of children entering primary school have decreased. The 1999 **Jiangxi Statistical Yearbook** reports Rivercounty’s primary school enrolment rate as 100 per cent and the rate of progression from primary to junior high as 96.1 per cent.32 The provincial averages are recorded as 99.6 per cent and 94.2 per cent respectively.33 By this measure, the county has exceeded the year 2000 targets of 99 per cent and 94 per cent which

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32. Kabeer, “Inter-generational contracts,” pp. 564–65

Figure 1: **Percentage of Rivercounty Students Progressing**

![Graph showing percentage of students progressing](image)


were set by the State Council in 1995. But caution is needed when interpreting the rates published in the yearbook. The “enrolment” figure is the proportion of children whose names are registered with a school at the start of an academic year and the “progression” figure measures the proportion of fifth-year primary school students entering the first year of junior high, and so does not include those students who have left primary school before the fifth year. The Rivercounty County Bureau of Education provided me with year-by-year and grade-by-grade school enrolment figures for 1979 to 1999. This longitudinal data suggests that only 68 per cent of students in the 1995 primary school intake graduated (in 1999), and only 64 per cent started junior high (in 2000). Figure 1 shows how these figures have changed over recent years. Clearly, the overall trend in Rivercounty is towards longer periods of schooling.

This increase in attendance reverses the flow of wealth between generations. Previously parents benefited from their children’s labour, but now they are deprived of it and incur the expense of school fees. Data from Rivercounty suggest that this has been translated into a desire for smaller families. Figure 2 shows a drop in the number of children enrolling in grade one. This indicates that the number of children in the county has fallen: primary enrolments are closely tied to the birth rate for seven years earlier. Interviews with rural couples confirm that the obligation to educate children strongly influences desired family size. In my


35. These levels of primary school completion fall below the official provincial average of 88.2%.

Figure 2: First Year Primary Enrolments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Historic</th>
<th>Predicted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>79</td>
<td>9000</td>
<td>9000</td>
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<tr>
<td>80</td>
<td>8000</td>
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<td>81</td>
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<td>85</td>
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<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>86</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>87</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Enrolment data from Rivercounty County Bureau of Education. Predicted enrolments calculated from Rivercounty county birth rates of seven years prior, from Jiangxi Statistical Yearbook, 1999.

survey of 99 couples where the woman is aged between 22 and 43, 69 had stopped reproducing. Of these 69 couples, 43 per cent (30) said “the cost of the school fees makes it impossible to raise more than two children.” A further 13 per cent (9) said it is impossible to have more children, and when asked why, they referred to school expenses and birth planning fines. One-third (23) said that they would not have more children because of state policies. However a few of them added that in any case they would have only one more child because of schooling expenses. The remaining seven couples said “I don’t know” or gave other responses. Of the 30 couples who had not stopped their reproduction, most wanted to achieve the community-sanctioned ideal of only two children with at least one son37: they too pointed to the costs of schooling, saying that they could only afford to raise two or three.

School Restructuring and Modernization

School reforms have been precipitated by the fall in student numbers and the pressure to use resources more efficiently. The reforms are explained as necessary to improve population suzhi. The restructuring involves closing some village schools, making others infant-only and concentrating resources on key “complete” schools. This has meant that many children have to board at a complete school away from the village for the final years of primary school. The restructuring of education is being accompanied by a more wide-ranging modernizing of educational practices such as increased emphasis on academic achievement, modern

teaching methods, a regimented timetable and the promotion of self-reliance in daily life. Restructuring is releasing resources to provide complete schools with larger classrooms, better libraries and more equipment for sport and music. There are also plans to use these additional funds to achieve the nine years compulsory schooling which the central state asserts is “vital for improving national suzhi.”

The pressure to provide high-quality education combined with the increase in boarding has produced an “enclosed method of schooling” (guanbi shi). The children board for six days a week: school begins on Sunday evening and finishes around midday on Saturday. The routine is highly disciplined with time, space and relations among individuals structured so that children learn to regulate their conduct in ways that “turn them into material” (chengcai) for modernization. The discipline of the routine can be seen in the timetable in Table 1.

Although the guanbi method is not yet practised throughout rural China, observations of it in Rivercounty provide a glimpse into the emerging trend of placing children in an environment where they are taught not only academic subjects but also how to conduct themselves as good citizens and workers. According to Rivercounty officials, the guanbi system has academic benefits because it creates a level playing field where children receive extensive instruction regardless of their home environment. Officials also explained that it enhances students’ suzhi

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Table 1: **Boarding School Timetable**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6.00 a.m.</td>
<td>Get up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.15</td>
<td>Morning exercise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.30–7.10</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.10</td>
<td>Breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>Morning bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.20–9.50</td>
<td>First and second lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.50–10.10</td>
<td>Physical exercises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.10–11.40</td>
<td>Third and fourth lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.50</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.30–2.30 p.m.</td>
<td>Afternoon sleep in the dormitory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.40</td>
<td>Get out of bed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.50</td>
<td>Afternoon bell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.00–4.30</td>
<td>Fifth and sixth lessons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.40–5.20</td>
<td>Activity class such as art, music or sport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.30</td>
<td>Dinner in hall</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.50–7.50</td>
<td>Self study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8.30</td>
<td>Lights out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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because they must wash their own clothes and dishes as well as live together, thereby developing life skills. This is seen as especially valuable because nowadays there are fewer children in each household, so parents are inclined to spoil them. It could be argued that officials are inventive in using suzhi to identify virtues in the tough conditions faced by boarders. Children for their part experience the school regime as ku (bitter) and many parents also feel that their children are too young to board.

In sparsely populated areas guanbi is common because few villages have sufficient students to support their own schools. Rivercounty is one of the first areas of Jiangxi to adopt the guanbi method, partly because of its below average population density. It is also widespread in the poorer isolated areas of Yunnan, Guangxi and Guizhou provinces. However, even where there is no demographic imperative guanbi is being adopted because it is associated with the superior methods of private urban boarding schools. The County Bureau of Education officials cites this as another reason to embrace the guanbi system, and stipulates that all junior high students must board irrespective of how close they live to their school.

Despite the aim of providing quality education for all, the guanbi system may adversely affect the educational opportunities of some children. This is because poor or labour-deficient households might be unable to afford the additional cost of boarding or the complete loss of their child’s labour.41

Assessment, Competition and Professionalism

Suzhi discourse invites the assessment of the all-round development of individuals, but in practice, assessment is conducted on a much narrower basis. Students are evaluated primarily by exams with extra-curricular activities as supplementary. Teachers are assessed on their performance in professional exams and teaching competitions as well as the grades of their students. And schools are judged by exam results and the quality of the teaching staff. So rote-learning and testing remain central despite educational reformers emphasizing the need to move away from them.42

Andrew Kipnis’s study in north China finds that suzhi reforms are undermined by “educational discipline” – gruelling homework and schooling regimes – because people value passing exams as a way to escape rural life. I extend Kipnis’s analysis by arguing that teachers as well as students and parents adhere to educational discipline because exams measure suzhi and hence determine distributional outcomes:

41. Mobo Gao, Gao Village, p. 101. During the Cultural Revolution, the need to board in high schools prevented many from attending because of cost and distance.
higher *suzhi* students get university places, higher *suzhi* teachers keep their jobs and officials presiding over high *suzhi* schools obtain promotions. This *suzhi*-mediated competition means that individuals and institutions devise tactics for obtaining positive assessments.

The assessment of teachers’ *suzhi* is central to the push to regularize the rural teaching profession. This generates conflict over the qualities needed to deliver *suzhi* education: *minban* teachers stress experience while officials prioritize professional qualifications. Periodically the provincial ministry of education gives limited numbers of *minban* teachers the opportunity to up-grade to “regular” status by either exams or other forms of appraisal. *Minban* teachers prepare for the conversion exam by private study, correspondence course or attending teacher training college with annual fees of up to 2,000 yuan. However, throughout the countryside, many teachers are unable to convert because of lack of connections or arbitrary decisions about eligible birth dates.43 In Rivercounty, fewer older teachers and women teachers have converted than their younger male counterparts.44 Those who fail to convert are sent back to farming, and feel that their service and experience are unappreciated.45

Even “regular” teachers do not enjoy job security. Declining enrolments mean that there are fewer rural teaching posts overall, and guaranteed jobs for teaching college graduates have been phased out since 1997. Moreover, new recruitment methods are being introduced. In 2001, for example, Rivercounty schools were permitted to recruit their own staff by consulting teaching records (preparation notes and student grades), conducting interviews and assessing the teaching demonstrations of candidates. Teachers losing their jobs and graduates failing to find them are legitimized by the necessity of competition to improve *suzhi*.

The intense competition in the job market is revealed by teachers’ accounts of how they must prove their *suzhi*. Many teachers undertake further professional training, and participate in weekly in-school teaching workshops and regional teaching competitions. But the perception of their *suzhi* also depends on the *suzhi* achievements of their students. Although outside authorities talk about *suzhi* education reforms, when it comes to assessment, the sporting and cultural aspects of *suzhi* take second place to exams.46 Teachers respond by visibly pursuing *suzhi* education whilst covertly prioritizing exams. As one teacher told me:

We have to deal with the demands of both exams and *suzhi* education, and they are not compatible because extra-curricula activities take away from study time. So we have “interest hobby groups” on Wednesday afternoons but we use this time to coach the students.47

43. Liu Shaochao, “How to unknot the problem of converting community teachers to regular teachers,” *Ban yuetan (China Comment)*, No. 16 (1999), pp. 52–53.
44. Between 1991 and 2000, of those who became “regular” teachers by taking exams, 141 were men and 55 were women. Between 1988 and 1998, of those who became regular teachers by having their standard assessed, 82 were men and 32 were women.
46. Hunan Television Station, 14 October 2000, 7.30hrs. Teachers declined to be interviewed about *suzhi* education in rural schools because “now even regular teachers are being laid off.”
47. Interview, 18 November 2000.
As a further example, when visited by county-level inspectors, teachers ensure that their preparation notes show attention to *suzhi*.

Exam results are also a key element in the assessment of the *suzhi* of schools. Some principals, particularly in poorer villages, say that because they do not have the gymnasiums, computers and musical instruments needed for *suzhi* education, the best they can do for the school and the students is to concentrate on exams. As schools are rewarded for good exam performance, the strongest pupils are allocated the best teachers, while weaker students are encouraged to repeat. Additionally, under-achievers' needs are overlooked by curriculum designers preoccupied with progress and modernization.48 Such practices demoralize weaker students and increase the proportion of students repeating a year of schooling.49 In Rivercounty, of 125 children aged between six and 15 covered by my survey, 55 had repeated or were repeating at least one year, usually in primary school.

### Suzhi Labels

Both the education system and state developmental initiatives label villagers as low *suzhi* and deal with them accordingly, by instructing them in farming skills and civilized behaviour. The responses of rural people involve both accepting and challenging the labelling and its consequences. Of course internalizing and resisting are not mutually exclusive, and most people’s responses incorporate elements of both. For example, they may internalize low *suzhi* as the explanation for unfair outcomes, and resist the allocation of farming knowledge to their children.

The education system disseminates a meritocratic ideology that labels and filters out low *suzhi* rural people, legitimizing structural biases. A literal example of labelling may be found in the *suzhi* textbook for third graders: it features a table of average heights for rural and urban children at different ages and instructs pupils to measure themselves and compare the results against the table.50 Filtering may be seen in the view common among university recruiters that "a child with high ability and low grades is preferable to a child with high grades and low ability." In practice this means that local urban children are favoured because they possess artistic, sporting or English language abilities which bring honour to the university in regional competitions. Students from predominately rural provinces with fewer universities are further disadvantaged because most major city universities stipulate a higher entry requirement for applicants from outside their area.

The labelling and filtering of rural people means that particular types of knowledge are seen as appropriate for them. As fewer than 20 per cent of rural high school students are likely to enter university, rural students are educated for rural lives.51 There are two dimensions to this educa-

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tional determinism: teaching rural children to be good citizens and teaching them to be good labourers. First, children are taught to be good citizens (who, for example, take the initiative to pick up litter) even if their intellectual suzhi is not high. This occurs in both rural and urban areas, but as mentioned earlier, policy makers perceive that extra effort is needed for turning rural children into Chinese citizens – a situation reminiscent of state efforts in rural France to transform “peasants into Frenchmen.”

Secondly, children are taught the skills they need to be good labourers, either as agricultural or migrant workers. Farming knowledge is thought necessary for all students because it is expected that migrants will eventually return to the land. There are weekly “labour classes” with topics including threshing grain and making a broom. Teachers say that rural children know more about these tasks than they do, but as suzhi education requires them to be seen to teach this practical class, they provide a perfunctory discussion of the textbook before moving on to further training in exam subjects. The guanbi system, which removes children from the village environment, reduces their everyday exposure to informal training in farming and life skills, and so may work against the suzhi objective of preparing them for the “lives they are likely to lead.”

How do parents respond to the labelling of their children as low suzhi? A common response is to accept their lowly place in the world as “inevitable” and as resulting from lower suzhi rather than from unequal power relations. Such a response can be seen in parental ambivalence towards higher education and their adaptation of their ambitions for their children to those that appear possible. Many parents told me: “if the schooling doesn’t go into their heads then let them come home and farm.” Another parental response is to try to improve their children’s suzhi by ensuring they receive the knowledge valued in modern society, for example by sending their children to school a year early, establishing kindergartens and rejecting attempts to educate them for manual work. By taking suzhi matters into their own hands in these ways, parents gain some control over the enunciation of suzhi and are therefore “empowered.”

52. Weber, “Turning peasants.”
54. Rachel Murphy, How Migrant Labor is Changing Rural China (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
56. Lynn Payne, “Making schools modern,” pp. 232–33. Mobo Gao, Gao Village, p. 104. The aim of agricultural lessons during the Mao era was to give practical knowledge to as many people as possible. Since then agricultural lessons have been incorporated into suzhi education, with the aim of allocating knowledge according to people’s role in nation-building.
For a few hundred yuan parents send their children to school a year early in order to give them a head start and avoid them having to repeat a grade when they are older. Schools are happy to take these auditing students because they boost both scarce resources and shrinking class sizes. Of the 55 students in my survey who had repeated or were repeating a year of study, 14 had audited their first year. One more child had been sent to school a year early but was subsequently promoted by one grade. Additionally, half the six-year-olds in the survey (3) were in the process of auditing grade one. One mother expressed a common view: “In our countryside everyone repeats. If she can repeat now then she won’t have to later.” Of course, as already observed, repeating can be counter-productive if the children become bored with school.

Another way that parents invest in the suzhi of their children is by sending them to community kindergartens. In several villages that I visited women educated to primary level had set up a classroom in their houses where they taught numbers, characters and songs. At 100 yuan per year, the kindergartens were generally affordable. Parents told me that they sent their children to kindergarten to give them some of the advantages enjoyed by city children.

Like villagers elsewhere in the developing world, parents in Rivercounty resent and resist the education of their children for lower-status occupations. Both education and wider economic reforms are informing local aspirations. Parents want their children to avoid farming because of its association with hardship and low suzhi. The final-year primary students I surveyed wanted to be teachers, doctors, soldiers, scientists and other occupations encountered in textbooks. As a result, parents and students prioritize the academic knowledge needed for passing exams. During the late 1990s the Rivercounty Technical School produced textbooks about local farming and geography but they were abandoned because they failed to address extra-local aspirations.

Nationalism and Local Loyalties

A key part of suzhi policy is to encourage individuals to identify themselves as citizens of the nation. Nationalism entails appealing to people as individuals and recognizing the nation’s unique character, mission and destiny. According to Craig Calhoun it relatedly involves “the modern idea of the individual as the locale of indissoluble identity – at least potentially self-sufficient, self-constrained and self-moving … the ‘punctual self’.” Chinese intellectuals’, planners’ and educators’ concern with suzhi is grounded in this view that the strength of the nation and its position in history are reducible to the quality of its citizens. As one scholar states:

60. For education shaping off-farm aspirations, see Anita Chan, Richard Madsen and Jonathon Unger, Chen Village Under Mao and Deng (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 252–53.
62. Ibid. p. 44.
Achieving the modernization of China involves simultaneously modernizing the nation, the system and the individual. A population comprised of individuals is the crux of all social activity and social development. So we can say that modernizing the *suzhi* of the population is the essential social foundation for realizing China’s economic modernization.63

This agenda of producing individual citizens loyal to the nation exists in tension with the everyday social practices that reinforce local interests, relationships and forms of group identification, such as patrilineal kinship groups. The nation-building agenda of the Chinese education system seeks to transcend these local group identifications and interests by appealing to rural children directly as individual members of the nation.64

Local allegiances can work both for and against national goals. They work for national goals because the social relationships of ordinary people, their common experiences of family and community, and their sharing of values that are uniquely Chinese are invoked in the media and in school textbooks to encourage a sense of shared national identity.65 On the other hand local allegiances can work against nation-building when individuals mobilize to protect their group’s status or their status within that group. For example, patrilineal kinship groups are often accused of trying to augment their strength through son preference and pronatalism.66 And there are instances of clan bullying so severe that students from smaller clans are unable to attend school.67

How do schools produce modern solidarities that override other loyalties such as kinship? Elaine Unterhalter argues that education is in separable from the state and involves acting out citizenship through meaning-making activities.68 This can be seen in the ways that national ceremonies, rituals, symbols and systems of governing are replicated within schools. As examples, each morning the children line up in the schoolyard and salute as the national flag is raised. At assemblies they sing the national anthem, hear about the deeds of exemplary national figures and then participate in the public registering of “good classmates and good deeds.” In class the students speak standard Mandarin and learn about national history and geography.69 Some students are nominated as classroom cadres, and diligent students are rewarded by being invited to join the Children’s Party Corps and wear its red scarf.

Further visible connections between rural schools and the national whole occur through the activities of the national charity, Operation Hope. Operation Hope arranges the sponsorship of poorer children by


64. Calhoun, *Nationalism*, p. 44.


urban families so that these children can complete their schooling; such stories are sometimes reported in the media. Operation Hope also obtains donations for either establishing new schools or assisting existing ones. Plaques and school names remind students of this national support: examples from Rivercounty include the Shanghai Sheluo (photocopier manufacturers) School and the Fumin (a tobacco company) Hope School.

Although schools are emissaries of national policies, they are nevertheless intermeshed in village life. An attractive school building reflects well on the village committee members because they are responsible for maintaining the school, providing desks and tables and paying the wages of minban teachers: in the village election campaigns of 1999, the candidates for village head often promised to contribute to suzhi education by improving the school facilities.70 Given the symbolic nature of village primary schools, when one is closed, villagers accuse their committee members of “being without ability.” But according to township leaders, in most cases, a little “thought work” (that is, persuasion), involving pointing out the suzhi benefits of sending children to a modern key school, resolves the problem.71 However, local agendas may mean that closing primary schools meets with stronger resistance. For example, in one case, long-standing rivalries between patrilineal groups have resulted in farmers in Village A refusing to close their school and send their children to the school in Village B. Farmers in Village A run their school without the approval of the County Bureau of Education and the village committee hires its own minban teachers who follow the national curriculum.

In some village schools children bring clan conflicts into the playground. Such conflicts are seen to exemplify low rural suzhi so teachers tell them: “You shouldn’t bully each other just because you come from different lineages. You are all Chinese.” However when schools are restructured and children are removed from their villages to guanbi schools, local politics are less likely to be brought into the school because the children are socialized into a wider community and surrounded by motifs of the nation-state. Relatedly, suzhi education is charged with helping to build collective national identity. For example, at the time of the Sydney Olympics and as Beijing was bidding for the 2008 games, Chinese scholars recommended that teachers use Olympic-based activities to foster a national consciousness.72 In Rivercounty, I observed various examples of these activities including partaking in Olympic-inspired written and artistic projects, watching the national team on television and holding “School Olympics.”73

70. The tax burden is not to exceed 5% of the village’s annual per capita income for the previous year. About 3.5% of this tax burden is the village and township tax combined.
71. Interview, 18 November 2000.
Conclusion

Suzhi discourse is used pervasively by the state to implicate every villager in the nation’s quest for modernization. In the education system suzhi facilitates the implementation of disparate policy initiatives. This case study has focused on the policy areas of accelerating demographic transition; modernizing and restructuring schools; promoting market competition, meritocracy and professionalism; implementing rural development initiatives; and fostering national consciousness in the countryside. Suzhi discourse produces identities that cause social agents to accept various developmental interventions, to interpret the difficulties that they encounter as indicative of the need for self improvement, and to regulate their everyday conduct in ways that conform to the common political drift of society.

The articulation of diverse policy initiatives through suzhi gives legitimacy to increased state intervention in some spheres and retreat in others. It legitimates increased intervention in the private sphere as can be seen in the role of the state in regulating fertility, encouraging good parenthood, removing children from the village and socializing them to be the citizens of a modernizing nation. On the other hand, it legitimates state retreat from the public sphere, particularly the withdrawal of collective welfare. Suzhi discourse helps to reduce the political difficulties of state retreat because farmers internalize the idea that ultimately, they are responsible for self-improvement. Meanwhile it explains the often unfair outcomes arising from various “modernization” policies and ongoing structural inequalities. Examples of such outcomes include farmers’ reproduction being restricted, low rural living standards, children missing out on university places and rural teachers losing jobs.

Policy interventions articulated through suzhi discourse and realized through schools encourage individuals to regulate their conduct in ways compatible with the state-sanctioned teleology of modernization. Schools contribute to wider state efforts to encourage self-discipline in reproduction and child-rearing. They are also important in transforming peasant children into modern citizens and industrious, self-reliant and co-operative workers. The role of schools in shaping norms is helpful for policy implementation because policies cost less to enforce when in harmony with local norms.74

Even though suzhi gives legitimacy and coherence to national policies, conflicts arise when individuals use it because they recognize its importance for life chances. As examples, teachers fight to prove their suzhi and so retain their jobs; parents challenge the distribution of particular kinds of knowledge to their children; and urbanites use suzhi to retain opportunities for themselves. But even by resisting external suzhi evaluations or struggling for suzhi recognition people legitimate the suzhi framework and reproduce the unequal power relations that it embodies. The ongoing

self-improvement ethos of *suzhi* overlaps with identity formation as a process of becoming, and is a metonym for the continual modernizing and “coming into being” of the nation.75

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75. Thomas Lemke, “The birth of bio-politics: Michel Foucault’s lecture at the College de France on neo-liberal governmentality,” *Economy and Society*, No. 30 (2001), pp. 190–207 at p. 191. This resonates with Lemke’s argument that the modern state and the modern autonomous individual “co-determine each others emergence.”