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# **The Regional and Rural-Urban Disparities of Primary Education in China**

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## 1. Introduction

“ A completed primary education is a basic human right...” (UNDG 2010:1), indicated by the “Thematic Paper on Millennium Development Goals 2: Achieve Universal Primary Education”. Throughout massive researches in the development field, it has reached a consensus that education is at least one of the key solutions to reduce poverty and, furthermore, ensure basic human right and gain human capital. As the second of the MDGs, obtaining universal primary education is considered as a way of empowerment for generating other broader social and economic aspects. Remarkable achievements have been seen during the past decades with more school-aged children involved into primary education system. However, according to UNDG, MDG2, namely “providing a full course of primary schooling for everyone in every country” (ibid) would not be fully reached by 2015 which means in many developing countries, a number of children would still be left outside the benefit of any education due to various reasons. In 2007, at least 72 million school-aged children were out of school, indicated by UNDG (ibid). Therefore the issue of spreading primary education is well worth investigating, including the significance, current situation and fact, existing reasons of failure and obstacles and potential solutions.

This thesis focuses on primary education in People’s Republic of China, which is regarded as one of the leading states in the development wave within the developing world. As China has made and is still making extraordinary accomplishment in (mostly) economic progress, other social factors are improving as well, among which is the wider spreading of primary education. Diversity exists much in the education system in different levels, such as regional and rural-urban disparity. Big gaps could be found in different sessions which lead to certain inequality and that should be considered as a more important issue rather than the progress of education itself in general. One ought to pay attention to different stages of educational system when doing an overall research on primary education operation. A variety of problems show the existing drawbacks and shortcomings of primary education development which could be summarized as such, “disparities in access, quality of education enjoyed by learners and in learning outcomes among populations and groups exist due in large part to social, economic and cultural factors” (ibid). Meanwhile, it also points out that household poverty, gender and some other cultural factors can be underlying causes for the problems and they also guide the direction for this thesis on China’s primary education.

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It is not difficult to find the significance of education in human development, as education is more closely linked with other social sectors and can even be seen as a foundation for achieving other goals. Thus in the Millennium Development Goals setting, to provide a full course in primary education universally is a key and essential goal to realize the rest and the linkages should not be ignored when making and implementing related policies. Primary education, the basis of the full education process, should then be the focus for the work of education spreading and it is also the most possible part to universalize. Primary education plays an important role to lay the foundation of necessary knowledge for both higher education and social involvement. In China's case, the resources and outcomes of education are distributed quite uneven in different aspects which are going to be the main issue discussed in this thesis. Both western and Chinese local scholars have contributed lots of efforts on investigation within this field, as well as Chinese researchers living in western societies (all above scholars would be mentioned in the methodological session). Their ideas from different angles into the issue could be quite interesting and significant for related discussion. Each of the researchers could usually focus on one particular factor among China's primary education, such as dropout rate, gender disparity, the influence from governments' action and the relations between poverty reduction.

The thesis is going to examine a variety of factors within particularly China's primary education system, including existing problems and obstacles with a number of literature reviews. Meanwhile, comparisons and analysis are made on region-based level, giving an overall picture relying on different geographical conditions. Besides, a small case study in a medium-sized city in south-eastern China is conducted, not being representative but rather providing a deeper looking and understanding into Chinese primary education system.

## **2. Purpose and Research Questions**

As *Social Research Methods* stresses, "do not begin your data collection until you have identified your research questions reasonably clearly" (Bryman 2008:92).

Thus the main purpose of this research is to investigate a variety of disparities on different aspects of China's primary education, particularly between wealthier and more marginalized regions, as well as a similar comparison between rural and urban areas. Also, possible reasons and potential solutions are examined among the discussions.

Under the big research question, several sub-questions are analyzed, explaining some more detailed factors and problems surrounding the issue. The first one inspects the

role of governments and their policies for primary education in different geographical spaces, giving a general view of what attitudes and policies governments (the state) hold towards the building of primary education and their influences on education improvement, especially for those more marginalized areas. Moreover, local policies become essential support when they emphasize and pay more attention on the rural education construction.

Secondly, local developmental backgrounds do play an important part for its education promotion, so are households' conditions for individual's education. Generally, local economic and cultural development could affect education construction quite a lot, including school enrolment, access to education and learning outcomes. Usually, poverty in some marginalized regions could be such an obstacle to hinder local education progress. Furthermore, households' economic conditions and parents' educational level would have massive effect on children's education in the same way.

Thirdly, how do the school facilities and faculty influence the teaching quality and therefore, education outcomes? It is not difficult to find that urban and wealthier regions have much better and higher quality school facilities than those in rural and poorer regions, and better learning outcomes can lean to the urban sides as well. Teachers' qualification also privileges urban areas which produce better outcomes.

The fourth question focuses on the issue of dropout rate. Many research papers have pointed out the problem of school-aged children dropping out of schools. Reasons can be quite diverse, including family force or individual unwillingness.

Finally, the discussion leads to gender inequality. Is there a problem of gender bias in China's primary education? Considered as a sensitive topic, gender issues could be interesting and important to look at. Boys and girls may have different rate of access to schools, or their performance at school could be on different levels.

In general, rural-urban disparities and regional gaps on primary education development are easily discovered within China's education society. These expressions and manifestations in various social sectors are going to be researched in the paper and underlying reasons and suggestions are among the discussions as well.

### 3. **Methodology**

As mentioned above, literature review would be the main path for collecting valid ideas and forming relevant discussions. As Flick (2009) demonstrates in *An Introduction in Qualitative Research*, a totally new research field does almost not

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exist nowadays and it is quite necessary to do literature review before starting a research paper. Regarding different sections and aspects within the issue of China's primary education, there are particular literatures for each part. Various types of literatures consist of official documentation and reports from the United Nations' organizations subjected on the Millennium Development Goals 2, research papers from western scholars, Chinese local scholars, Chinese scholars researching and living in the western contexts and western ones living in Asia (who are going to be described below), aiming at different sections of primary education in China, dropout rate and economical influences, for example. Meanwhile, the literatures written both in English and Chinese languages are used. These resources are mainly from internet (United Nations' open documentation and public reports and online open article searching) and Lund University library and database.

Documents and reports from organizations of United Nations, such as United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations Development Group (UNDG) and one of its members, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Among the massive branched organizations of United Nations, those which have a clearer aim at fighting for children's right and aid, cultural and educational development are more connected and responsible for the promotion of universal primary education. Many of them have official documentation and reports, declaring their positions and standpoints for realizing MDG2. "*Thematic Paper on MDG2: Achieve Universal Primary Education*" (2010) by UNDG is quite a valid document, giving a general and comprehensive view on understanding the significance, critical shortcomings on current situation of global primary education construction, lessons learned and valid suggestions on measures and policies for its further and better development. However, closer inter-linkages between primary education and realization of the rest of MDGs should be found in other reports under United Nations while it is described much within this paper;

Within the paper of "*The Central Role of Education in the Millennium Development Goals*" (2010), UNESCO is also strengthening the importance of education progress during the overall development process, stressing the close relations between universal primary education and most of other MDGs. Through looking at how MDG2 and other goals could influence each other, UNESCO provides several possible pathways for promoting primary education universally from different social sectors. In addition, the paper should have indicated more of current status of primary education development and existing challenges such as gaps and inequalities in order to give more specific suggestions on policy-making;

In UNICEF's report, "*Goal: Achieve Universal Primary Education*", it shows advocacy by indicating particularly the importance of the preparation for primary education, such as children's health care and school's safe water and sanitation, and also put emphasis on girls' equal education, connecting it to MDG3 in gender perspective (UNICEF 2010). In fact, the angle of the vision on pre-school project and

gender equality is considered as quite relevant and vital while other policies are mainly looking at primary education process itself;

As the largest external financer for education in the developing world, the World Bank is a better-known institution which always plays its supportive role in promoting education and more recently, MDG2 with contributing majorly in the financial way. They also provide valid and comprehensive data on education researches which is of great help for the thesis. Other documents and reports of United Nations are also quite available and valid for the thesis, leading to the right direction by providing UN's official declaration of MDG2 and their standpoint on achieving universal primary education. These documentation and researches not only offer ordered and systematic discussion and ideas of the importance of primary education, but also point out the fact on existing challenges and obstacles that the international society should pay attention to when promoting primary education and MDG2. It is helpful to guide the proceeding of this research as well as the shaping of proper structure, especially on forming the theoretical chapter of the thesis.

A good summary of characteristics of valid literature review is contributed by Flowerdew (1997) which points out that it needs to be well informed, giving good angles, ideas and suggestions. Apart from the theoretical literature hunting, a number of literatures related to a variety of particular issues and aspects of China's primary education construction and development are found as well. Research papers in both Chinese and English languages are taken into consideration.

Some articles with interesting angles focus on specific problems. The PH.D of University of Michigan, as well as a researcher on social problems throughout Asia, Chile, some African countries and Central America, Philip H. Brown, examines the close connection between poverty (wealth levels and differences) and educational attainment (Brown & Park 2001). Nevertheless, poverty, seen as the main element resulting in educational backwardness, should also be considerably closely linked with other social factors;

The faculty member of Boston College as well as a researcher mainly in China's public policy (pension and educational reforms), Teng Margaret Fu, emphasizes one important contribution of China's rural-urban disparity on primary education, namely the two-track educational system of government-supported form in urban areas and family-supported for the other (Fu 2005). At the same time, it should be noticed that the issue discussed in the paper needs to be analyzed depending on time difference;

The Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor in Institute of Educational Research, University of Oslo, Norway, Fengshu Liu, has published an article investigating the reasons of failure to complete the whole 9-year compulsory primary education in some areas in China, institutional or individual reasons for dropouts (Liu 2004). Meanwhile, Mark Mason, a professor of International Education and Lifelong



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Learning at the Hongkong Institute of Education, also does a meaningful research in why students tend to have a higher rate of dropouts from schools than the official statistics usually admit, in fact (Mason & Chung 2012). These two researches could be conducted from different angles while aiming at the same issue which is interesting to make comparisons.

Some other literature and articles are used apart from them mentioned above (including some news and reports), all of which contribute to guiding a valid and quite relevant research for China's primary education development and the disparities existing.

However, some data and statistics required for the thesis can be missing and hard to search for. In all the documentation and reports from the United Nations found, there is a lack of detailed discussion on particularly rural and urban bias on education development; nonetheless, rural conditions can imply many of the situations in marginalized regions which are stressed a lot in the discussions in the materials. Moreover, it is recognized as a big problem in some poor regions in China that the local development conditions are far from satisfaction; thus the statistics and evidence might be hidden from public, or even there is no detailed investigation on the issue. One possible solution is to search for some personal observation on these marginalized places but then the reliability can be unstable as well. Otherwise the information vacancy has to be left out there and the underlying reasons and implication have to be explained.

In addition, a small case study would be conducted for a deeper understanding of China's primary education system in a small city along the south-west coast called Quzhou, Zhejiang. It is necessary to notice that this specific case study tends not to be representative for China's education operation, but rather be a deeper looking at how education runs in a more detailed way and giving a better explanation of phenomena displayed. The main method applied for the case study is the use of questionnaires. Due to time and space limit, the distribution of questionnaires and collection of replies are helped by my mother, who works at the local governmental Official Record Office. General questionnaires and specific questions are both delivered to different respondents and answers are analyzed. One interesting phenomenon occurred during the process, namely their anxiety about letting out "negative answers" (if there are some) and that happened on my mother as well. This should be explained more detailed in the case study part.

Questionnaires are displayed at the end of the thesis.

#### 4. **Theoretical Framework**

“ Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory.” This is a remarkable quotation by a UK charity organization called Primary Education for All (PEFA) from article 26 of the 1948 United Nation’s Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Calling for attention and help, Primary Education for All is indicating sad facts on how many countries are still far away from the goal of achieving universal primary education, especially in Sub-Sahara Africa. While millions of school-aged children are still totally left out from any education, girls form the larger part and women form almost two-thirds of adult illiteracy; another 1.8 million teachers are in demand for achieving universal primary education by 2015, according to PEFA.

With big challenges ahead, the deep significance of education needs to be fully understood. Set as the second of the Millennium Development Goals by the United Nations, attention has been paid to achieving universal primary education and realization of the rest of MDGs is closely linked with it. Within different branched organizations of United Nations, each one is focusing on some specific sectors in development and they give valid suggestions on policies and measures from their own works and researches. In general, the significance, current status, including challenges and problems and valid suggestions towards universalizing primary education are discussed below.

#### **4.1 Significance**

The official declaration of the Millennium Development Goals 2 is stated by United Nations 2010 Summit Fact Sheet on MDG2 as such: “ensured that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling” (UN 2010:1). Set as the second of MDGs, there is strong evidence and reasoning to declare that to achieve universal primary education is one of the key works on the global development agenda.

Without doubt, education is seen as an important component of human capital. To obtain education is one symbol of ensuring one’s basic human right; also, it is a means for empowering people to gain access to broader “economic, social, political and cultural benefits” (UNDG 2010:1), according to the thematic paper of MDG2. As *Right to Education Project* emphasizes, education provides people the ability, capacity and confidence to ensure and protect one’s other rights. In a sense, education level is one of the determinants of a society’s development level. For individuals, one ought to have the basic skills and knowledge to understand and access information on his/her other legal rights, and therefore be able to create declares and voices to make themselves heard; furthermore, people could use legal instruments to protect and demand other rights. To enable people to protect legal human rights is also conducive to social stability.

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In a broader way, education empowers people to gain basic knowledge and ability to access broader social sectors; therefore it is the foundation of empowerment for individuals and furthermore, larger communities. In this case, primary education forms the basis of this foundation and preparation for people before entering a more complex social context. In order to make each of social sectors operate effectively, orderly and productive, participants within them need to hold necessary capacity to contribute in each field. Besides, population with higher education levels has a tendency to have better behaviors and performances which contributes to a more efficient social functioning. According to UNESCO, “without the knowledge and various skills developed through schooling and other basic education programs, the opportunities for individuals and the ability to act independently are greatly reduced” (UNESCO 2010:6). When it is too difficult to ensure a whole circle of education, to spread primary education in a larger scale seems more possible and it is hopeful to lay a strong foundation in the whole society, although it is still regarded as too ambitious that the target of universalizing primary education by 2015 would not be fully achieved.

While education can have massive influence on other social sectors, it would also be quite affected by them; therefore it is strongly suggested that education should be “a major priority for additional policy attention and resources” (UNDG 2010:1), indicating that policy making and implementation should lean to the development of education in a way. Primary education is quite closely linked with other social sectors development; more specifically, as in the report of UNESCO summarizes in the paper “*The Central Role of Education in the Millennium Development Goals*”, MDG2 is considered to be the key factor to realize many of the other MDGs. MDG1 focuses on poverty reduction, targeting to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Simply, education provides valid knowledge and skills for certain fields of production: both for the promotion of national incomes and personal earnings and therefore poverty reduction in an overall way. Massive evidence shows a negative relation between years of schooling and poverty level which indicates that higher enrolment of education is incentive for poverty reduction. More particularly, households headed by persons with higher educational level tend to contribute a lot less to the poverty rate, according to UNESCO observation. Generally, “an additional year of schooling can increase a person’s earnings by 10% and average annual gross domestic product (GDP) by 0.37%” (UNESCO 2010:11). Due to a lack of education, adult illiteracy has apparently become a disadvantaged factor that harms social productivity and economy.

Education is also conducive to reduce child mortality as is linked with MDG4. It is mostly shown on the impact of parents’ educational levels on children, especially mothers’. Mothers with better education experiences bare important knowledge and skills for taking care of children and their health; thus children are more likely to survive much longer than those whose mothers have low or no schooling years. “While the effects of mothers’ education on child health vary across countries, on

average, each additional year of a mother's schooling reduces the probability of the infant mortality rate by 5% to 10%" (ibid:12). Similarly, maternal health could also be well improved in this way, as well as combating severe diseases. Education provides not only knowledge and information on prevention, protection and treatment of diseases as HIV, AIDS and malaria, but also teaches people living in high-disease-spreading areas better behavior, self-dignity and respect to those who are infected.

Moreover, MDG7 – ensuring environmental sustainability could also benefit much from primary education spreading. When global economy is promoting, environmental problems occur on larger scales which attract increasing attention from the sustainable development field. Climate change and more natural disasters put the vulnerable groups in higher risks. By spreading education, it is possible to offer people at potential risk useful and important skills and information of how to protect oneself against natural emergencies and long-term actions of disaster prevention. In doing this, special subjects and classes on relevant teaching need to be added to education programs. Besides, new ideas should also be integrated into teaching programs. "Some governments have integrated climate change modules into their compulsory education programs" (ibid:17) so that people get more education on environment protection and to learn to live environmentally friendly in daily life.

#### 4. 2 ***Current Trends and Challenges***

Since Millennium Development Goals were brought onto global development agenda, remarkable progress has been made during the last decade. In respect of achieving universal primary education, primary schooling enrolment within the global developing regions has increased considerably, reaching 89% in 2008 (UN 2010:1). Globally, 90.7% of primary school-aged children were involved into education by 2010 (World Bank 2012 <1>:4), according to The State of Education analysis from EdStats (Education Statistics). More particularly, the net enrolment rate (NER) in South and West Asia reached 86% while sub-Saharan Africa reached 73% (UNDG 2010:6). The majority of children, especially in the developing world, have been involved into education and the number of children out-of-school has dropped by 33 million between 1999 and 2007 (ibid:1). Generally, according to UNDG, sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia hold the larger part of school-aged children out of school, as a matter of fact. Moreover, with paying crucial attention to increasing investments and other efforts on primary education spreading, as well as adopting relatively comprehensive policy-making guidance, not only enrolment rate has advanced throughout developing regions, but also gender and regional gap has been efficiently narrowed down, compared to previous situation (UNDG 2010:6).

Nevertheless, United Nations Summit in 2010 in New York, the "Fact Sheet" for MDG2: Achieve Universal Primary Education, it is clearly stated that "the current pace of progress is insufficient to meet the target by 2015" (UN 2010:1). During the

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process achieving universal primary education, more challenges happen to remind the international society of focusing on some factors that people tend to neglect. While attempt is made to raise the primary education enrolment in an overall context, it is also quite valuable to put an eye on avoiding wide gaps and disparities in education development. Evidence shows that achievement is quite uneven globally, with China catching up fast and efficiently but many sub-Saharan countries holding a lower enrolment rate with poorer quality of education (UNESCO 2010:12). Also, according to the data from 43 countries, “86% of urban children attend primary school, compared to only 72% of the rural children” (UNICEF 2010:18). The disparities among different regions could be examined from several aspects and these issues also apply to the rural-urban gaps in a sense, as the rural conditions often reflect the characteristics of marginalized areas.

Firstly, influences from governments and states can be diverse at different regions. Governments are seen as the main driver to make and implement policies towards the obtaining of primary education; therefore it is quite significant to translate the political will into actual policies and practice to regions. Governments play a role of guidance on national agenda and big direction of where primary education should be led to. However, not all beneficial policies could be performed well as expected in all places. Marginalized areas are possible to fail in putting them into practice due to a lack of resources, finance and capacity of management. Besides, governments can make policies regardless of local conditions and disadvantages of some marginalized regions which result in no avail for education promotion. In this case, wealthier regions might be able to apply these policies more easily and effectively, while marginalized places will be left further behind on the opposite way. In addition, policy-making can also favor the richer regions which are usually the centers for national development, putting more investment and providing better-quality service resources, for instance. Governments’ biases towards more developed regions may not be avoided fully and could be one of the contributing factors for big gaps between wealthier and poorer areas.

Secondly, different economic conditions become another important contributor for education marginalization. It is investigated that nations with better economic development tend to accelerate faster progress on education improvement while they hold the economic foundation and essential financial support. In fact, the poorest regions in the world are the ones which should take the most advantage of education and benefit from it; however, the fact leads to consequence that they not only suffer from economic backwardness but also low educational development (UNDG 2010:27). Global concerns suggest that countries like many sub-Saharan nations ought to have a higher share of their total GDP investing into education sectors in order to make benefits out of them; on the contrary, low-income countries tend to have the opposite situation since financial resources are to be sent to other priority sectors like hunger and poverty reduction. The EdStats indicates that “five of the lowest spending (of GDP per capita on per primary student) countries are in sub-

Saharan Africa” (World Bank 2012 <3>:23) which is much lower than the average spending of 16.7% (ibid). In this case, economic crisis or turndown can be such a shock to a nation’s overall development, including the stagnation of education construction. Besides, for many countries in the developing world, external aid is a big part to support education, though it is not a big amount compared to the total national income. Sadly, one of the current trends within the process approaching towards MDGs is that “across the MDGs the relative importance given to education by donors has been declining” (UNESCO 2010:4). Thus economic and financial gaps can lead to significant gaps on education development among different regions.

The following challenge lies in the quality of education, including learning environments, material and teachers. Much attention has been paid to achieve MDG2 and it is likely that increasing NER of primary schooling is the main work within it. In fact, one has to look beyond the enrolment rate when it has achieved great progress, taking education quality into consideration as well. Pushing children into education systems is never the only goal and work for education promotion; in other words, involving school-aged children into a good quality learning environment and providing them with proper and useful education are crucial to create real values of it. Especially within marginalized regions, people are living in a low living standard and a lack of necessary institutional, executive and financial capacity cannot be effectively avoided. These are indeed shortcomings for providing good-quality education, including proper learning environment (classrooms, school facilities and health care), studying materials and qualified teachers. It is estimated that “globally, an additional 10.3 million teachers are needed to meet universal primary education by 2015” (UNESCO 2010:8). Moreover, “sub-Saharan Africa has the highest pupil-teacher ratio at 43 pupils per teacher” (World Bank 2012 <2>:9) which shows the inadequacy of teacher resources in SSA. Therefore learning achievement of marginalized groups tends to be low and far from satisfactory. Sometimes even when net enrolment for primary education is improved in one place, the bad quality of education can still lead to no value and avail for local development, especially in marginalized societies.

The fourth concern is the crucial issue of dropout rate. Global primary education enrolment has obtained great progress; however, an underlying problem hinders the completion of a full primary schooling for a large number of children already in school. A variety of factors could result in high dropout rate, especially in marginalized groups. According to UNDG, in Sub-Sahara Africa and South and West Asia, almost one out of three children tend to drop out from their schooling systems (UNDG 2010:7); even in some countries in Latin America, one out of five children does not complete a full primary education (ibid). As estimated, “60.7 million primary school-age children were out of school in 2010” (Word Bank 2012:4). Children living in low living standard environments tend to have higher dropout rate due to a range of reasons, including both external and internal ones. Conflicts, weak governments and education systems, poor quality of schooling as well as household poverty and individual unwillingness are all potential causes for many children to leave school at a

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school-age. These causes are inter-linked together and children living in marginalized areas are more likely to suffer from them. Thus a full circle of primary schooling is often hard to complete in some less developed regions.

Finally, gender disparity is also attracting significant attention in education promotion. With the wave of increasing universal primary education on the global scale, gender equality in education is the issue that the society should not neglect. Female seems to remain in the disadvantaged group in education, while it is indicated that "...around 760 million adults (age 15 and over) are illiterate, two-thirds of whom are women" (UNDG 2010:7). Girls usually constitute the majority of children who are out-of-school or drop out in most under-developed countries while adult illiteracy leans to women's side as well. Statistics show that "Sub-Saharan Africa has the largest gender disparity in Primary Completion Rates with 74% of boys completing vs. 67% of girls in 2011" (World Bank 2012 <2>:33) and "over half of the world's out of school girls are in Sub-Saharan Africa" (World Bank 2012 <1>:37). To empower female in the educational section is of great importance; higher educated women tend to have fewer kids, participate more in family decision-making and social production activities, meet qualification of employment and be involved into career opportunities. Simply, women with secondary education qualification are performing better than those who complete merely primary education. Inspiringly, in promoting primary education, gender gap is narrowed down effectively, with some popular and practical policies like abolition of primary education tuition fees. It is mostly likely that gender disparity exists more often in higher level of education but in many marginalized regions, it is still a severe problem hampering education improvement and the social development.

#### 4.3 ***Policy Implications***

During the process of achieving MDG2, universal primary education, lessons have been learned and the United Nations organizations have made massive researches and concluded valid theories and suggestions on policy-making and implementation as guidance towards the goal. On the institutional level, much attention has been paid to the governments' performance, including policy-making, planning and management. More specific policy suggestions are discussed below as well.

##### a. *Governments and policy-making*

Being the main responsible entity, national governments are playing a leading role to set the big policy direction for the whole society's stepping forward. In order to achieve the primary education goal, governments need to prioritize the construction of primary education, setting clear targets for different aspects. Evidence shows that it is significant to have apparent objectives to follow which

increases the effectiveness of policy implementation. With primary education spreading as one of the priorities for national development work, a variety of programs and projects could be arranged and planned, while necessary and proper finance and resources could be allocated to relevant work. Valid policies are advantages for leading to the aim of making primary education “more available, affordable, accessible and culturally appropriate” (UNDG 2010:2).

The political will must be translated into real policies and practice into social work for education development. As mentioned above, strong financing resources are essential support to education maintenance and promotion, for school buildings, teaching infrastructure and materials, and faculty force. Together with the financial support, other different programs need to follow the main purpose of national policies with effective administration and management ability. According to UNDG, “the capacity to plan, manage, implement, and account for results of policies and programs is critical for achieving development objectives” (ibid:29). Moreover, different tasks are generated based on quite diverse social conditions; therefore, distribution of resources and plans need to be taken into consideration in terms of specific situations. More recently, the strategy of decentralization is introduced and it has received a consensus that power of policy-making and implementation should be more distributed to local administrations. It is a valid way to make accurate strategies for local education promotion relying on more detailed information and specific needs. Effective management and implementation on distribution of limited resources is quite influential to realize education progress in local levels. Meanwhile, good governance at local institutions is also essential for effectiveness; otherwise a waste of resources and labor power is unavoidable. As the UN Millennium Project stresses, one of the important strategies is to “create better institutions, increase transparency and provide better incentives” (UN Millennium Project 2005:66).

In addition, external aid is a big part in supporting national education development in many underdeveloped countries such as in sub-Saharan Africa. Certainly, external aid would not usually be a huge amount compared to national income; nevertheless, for many low-income countries, aid forms a large support for their development in educational sector while their own share of total income in education investment is only occupying a small proportion. Current trends show that international aid focusing on education improvement has been declining when economic crisis is shocking international society. It should be noticed that education is still the key for solving social problems and investment into education needs to remain or increase, especially for the donors’ realization.

Furthermore, two important disciplines are worth emphasizing in policy-making consideration. Firstly, policies should always be closely linked with other social sectors as education is increasingly related with them. Basic education has a strong impact in the development of other sectors such as poverty reduction,



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gender empowerment and environmental sustainability. Being a priority, primary education cannot only lead to success in other development fields but also be affected deeply by them. To recognize the close inter-linkages among different sectors is one of the determinants for efficient progress. In a more normalized way, in the *Thematic Paper on MDG2*, the central role of primary education in the Millennium Development Goals is clearly stated by UNESCO and their linkages are examined strongly. In the policy-making procedures, for example, within education formulation, special subjects on environment protection and self-rescue and protection against natural disasters, life skills and how to protect oneself from severe diseases like HIV and AIDS could be added in teaching plans; gender gap in education should be narrowed down for the overall gender equality improvement. On the other hand, other development policies should take primary education achievement into account such as the involvement of education in poverty reduction projects. The inter-connection is crucially vital for success of development strategies practice.

The other principle that policies ought to follow indicates the importance of giving concerns to marginalized population. Marginalized groups are the most possible to be ignored and vulnerable to internal and external disadvantages. Low primary education enrolment, high dropout rate, poor education quality and gender disparity all tend to occur at remote and poorer regions. If policies do not favor this group of population, all the benefits could hardly reach them equally as other areas. Being remote and marginalized brings potential poverty which hinders the education progress; in this case, policies must set these areas as emphasis to offer stronger support. Thus regional gaps can be possibly eliminated in a way. In addition, population within other vulnerable groups deserve more attention as well, consisting conflict-affected countries, minority ethnic groups, children with disabilities and those living in extreme poverty.

b. *Specific policies*

Before practice into real work, valid policies and strategies need to be carefully made which offer correct and clear principles for setting goals and programs. A range of available policies are provided through massive researches and practical lessons learned.

One of the most adopted policies is the abolition of the compulsory primary education tuition fees. It is regarded as quite efficient and practical for enrolling more children into primary schooling. As household poverty could be a strong factor contributing to children out of school, the abolition of tuition fees directly takes their financial pressure away and enables children from poor families to get involved into education. Successful examples consist of Ethiopia, which increased its net enrolment rate by 95 percent from year 2000 to 2008 (UN 2010:1).

Following the increase of global primary education enrolment, challenges of education quality emerge for a comprehensive development view. With more children attending schools, more finance, learning materials and teachers are required for catching up with the improvement. However, limited resources become obstacles for a relatively good education quality which results in poor learning outcomes and achievements. Students are more likely to drop out from schools in poor education environments and the incompleteness of schooling does almost no use and contribution to social impact. The compromise due to a lack of required resources leads to bad quality of education and unsatisfactory learning achievements and they could hardly benefit social development. Thus policies emphasizing the quality of primary education by putting more investment and efforts in it can promote education infrastructure, faculty resources and children's health care and enhance the positive and beneficial impact of education.

As mentioned above, UNICEF shows its advocacy of realizing MDG2 by addressing the significance of gender equity, pre-school and care for children's health in education. While girls tend to be the victims when any obstacles come up and require any children to leave school, their basic right to education needs better protection and more concerns from society. In the same way, education of girls seem to have a bigger social impact than boys since girls usually form the weak social groups and their rising up on all aspects would create massive benefits for development. UNICEF is dedicated to protect girls' right in the "Go Girls! Education for Every Child" and has committed \$233 million to these efforts (UNICEF 2010). Gender equality has been an important task on development agenda since long ago and that should also be taken into serious consideration on educational development.

Apart from gender equality in education, concerns are also given to pre-school training and children's health care and safety. According to UNICEF, early child-care before starting school is necessary for children in order to found the basis of both physical ability and knowledge; also, children's health and safety is strong guarantee for a good quality education outcome. UNICEF is devoting itself into "promoting early child-care and development to ensure a 'right start' to education" and "helping schools provide supplies, safe water and sanitation" (UNICEF 2010).

Eventually but not least, secondary education also deserves regards as it enhances the impact of education in general and keeps children in school till completion. Other educational programs in diverse forms and types are available alternatives for expanding educational opportunities, such as adult literacy courses, community schools and distance learning.

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## 5. Analysis

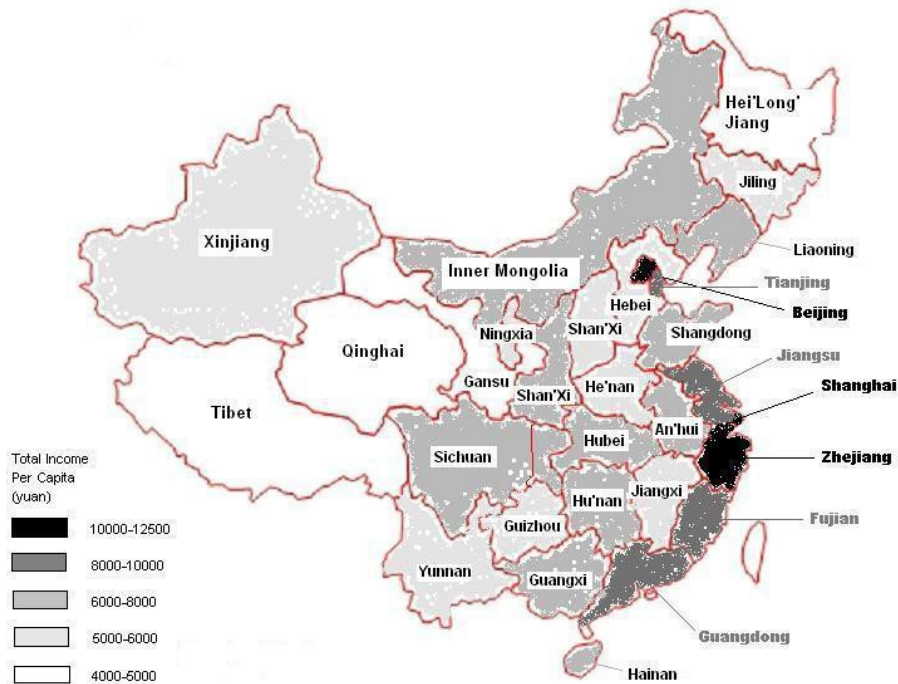
Apart from being set as the second of the Millennium Development Goals, education is also the topic and focus of the Dakar Forum on Education for All, following the spirit and theme of the World Conference on Education for All held at Jomtien, 1990 which reaffirmed the fundamental view that “education is a fundamental human right” and required the realization of several educational goals by 2000 (China’s 2003:6). Among the active participants within these conferences and events is the People’s Republic of China which has responded positively to the spirit of them, namely making education one of the central works of national development.

Policy-making institutions have realized that education is one of the requirements for social development as well as a symbol to reflect development level at one place. With the development strategy of “rejuvenating the country through science and education”, China has obtained significant achievements on education promotion, including the fact, for example, that “the enrolment ratios of Chinese primary school-age children increased from 97.9% in 1991 to 99.1% in 2000, with the gender gaps reduced from 1.22 percentage points to 0.07 percentage points” (China’s 2003:14). The percentage number of gender gaps is measured based on proportion of boy and girl students among all school-aged students involved.

While education has been set as the second of MDGs by the United Nations, China has its own educational goals and targets with the deadline of 2015: a) Make 9-year compulsory schooling universal in all counties, b) Develop early childhood care which meets the needs of the people, c) Reduce illiterate adult population, d) Meet the basic learning needs of youth and adults (China’s 2003: 30-32). From the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the policy of 9-year compulsory primary education was carried out but it was not possible for the governments to offer free education by then, so that tuition fees still had to be charged. The idea of education as the key solution has, however, been spreading nation-wide and each region adjusts development works to put primary education in central positions of their development agenda. Illiteracy rate has been declining dramatically from 1990, with a reduction of nearly 100 million illiterate people within 10 years (China’s 2003:16). However, female adults are usually forming the majority of the illiterate population, almost double of the men’s proportion, as a matter of fact (ibid).



Map 1. Provinces of China



Map 2. Total Income Per capita of Each Province in China (The First Quarter 2012) (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2010)

Map 1 gives an overview of geographical distribution of 22 provinces (inland), 5 autonomous regions and 4 direct-controlled municipalities of People’s Republic of China; Map 2 shows the regional economical development indicated by total income per capita at the first quarter of 2010. It can be observed that the only three districts which have an average income per capita per quarter are Beijing, Shanghai and Zhejiang Province, one of which is the capital city, one is the most developed international city in China and the last one is located beside Shanghai, along the coast. As follows, regions with income per capita between 8,000-10,000 yuan (which is seen as belonging to the high-income group) are basically all located along the east coast of China, such as Jiangsu and Tianjing. In the middle part of China where Sichuan, Hu’nan and Hubei, for example, are located, a variety of regions are regarded as middle-income level which also presents a few provinces at the east such as Shandong. Also, lower-income regions (with 5,000-8,000 yuan per capita) are usually found in the middle and western China as well, Guizhou and Xinjiang, for instance. As a matter of fact, the lowest-income districts with only 4,000-5,000 yuan per capita per quarter are mostly situated in the western China and one in the north-eastern region. Thus, based on the economical developmental levels, China is often divided into western, central and eastern parts when doing analysis on geographical distinctions. The north-eastern part is sometimes mentioned as it can have characters of low-income as well.

Based on different geographical conditions, education is recognized in different ways as well. It is not hard to observe that education usually works much better in wealthier areas in the world, and poorer regions tend to have poorer performance on education and also receive fewer benefits. Diverse economic levels certainly play a big part, as well as other factors such as cultural and political reasons. In the case of China, similar phenomenon shows the picture that in more developed areas, especially along the south-east coast, education is working much more effectively and people take advantage of better education for its local development. For instance, in year 2000, among the 450 counties which failed the educational goal of “two basics” (explained in section 5.2), only 59 were located in the eastern region. Nevertheless, in some of China’s poorer inland areas, both education conditions and outcomes are barely satisfactory.

The geographical advantage of being along the coast also determines a variety of advantages for development; for instance, being located along the south-eastern coast enables these regions to be more open to outside new ideas as a cultural benefit and open on commercial and trading communication to promote economy. It is more like a virtuous circle where higher standard of development motivates education promotion and education can benefit local development in a wide range. The situation is the opposite in marginalized regions of China.

Similarly, the disparity between primary education in urban and rural areas could be explained with the same reasons as well. Baring various types of geographical conditions (such as mountainous geographical characters, unbeneficial climate or coastal locations, flat and wide terrains, favorable climate), each part of China is having different development patterns based on their specific geographies. Their geographical environment is connected with more complicated social sectors, including economical and cultural development, political activities, infrastructure construction and social stability. Both physical geographies and social development altogether create a strong influence on how primary education can function within the regions. Thus the issue provides an interesting topic of distinction, including problems and obstacles, and inner reasons of primary education development in different parts of China.

### ***5.1 Overview***

As mentioned above, educational disparities exist on a large scale in China. The main gaps in education are displayed between marginalized regions and the wealthier ones, for instance, rural and urban areas, eastern and western China. Rural education development is usually seen as “unstable, unbalanced and low-leveled” (Zheng 2009:1). It is also estimated that the average number of year of receiving education among urban population has reached 13 years while the rural population has less than 7 years (Huang 2010). 15% of the total population has not realized the 9-year compulsory education and these areas are mostly poor places in the west (China’s

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2003:20). The uneven education opportunities are often found within various disadvantaged and vulnerable groups which include “sparsely populated areas, not easily accessible mountainous and pastoral areas lacking developed transportation systems” (China’s 2003:20) and “the urban and rural poor, disabled people, ethnic minorities and floating population or migrants” (China’s 2003:21).

The gap between either rural and urban areas or wealthier and poorer areas is the consequence and reflection of the non-functioning education system. The increasing gap of education between regions of different development levels will not only hamper educational construction but also intensify social inequality. The unbalance leads to another common phenomenon of low quality of rural migration into urban areas. Rural inhabitants seek to find a better living in the urban sides but their educational backgrounds are usually not satisfactory. Thus their productivity tends to be average and it will hardly lead to great distribution, in a sense. This is regarded as another consequence of educational marginalization while low-quality migration labors are filling the urban spaces. Thus, if the rural population, especially the younger generation who carry the responsibility for better rural development, can have higher level of education, contribution would be made to city advancement and more importantly, agricultural production back to the rural sides.

Therefore, education in rural and more marginalized regions needs to be the central concern of educational construction as rural population occupies more than half of China’s population and a large amount of them are illiterate (Li 2012:2). In order to transfer the population pressure into population advantage of human talent resources, to educate this group of more disadvantaged population has to become the essential work on the educational development agenda.

## **5.2 The role of governments and policies for primary education in different geographical spaces**

### ***a. The central role of governments in general***

The government is seen as the leading institution guiding the direction of national development forward to a higher level in all aspects, with the policy making and implementation in a general view. The state government usually sets the general principle of policy-making for lower levels of governments which make their own strategies based on local conditions. All the practices put into different social sectors follow the policy direction to make efficient development; therefore the role of governments and their policies made are of vital significance to guide an effective achievement in various social sectors, including primary education construction. At the same time, policy-making needs to have a theoretical foundation for the right decisions. Some theories for the governments’ policy-making for education development include education reforms, integrated approaches, governments responsible for provision, multiple education forms (China’s 2003:30).

As mentioned, China has participated actively in various international conferences and events on promoting education opportunities and basic human right for children, especially in developing countries. It implies that the Chinese government gives strong attention on educational development and makes commitment to protect children's right to basic education. Additionally, it is also published widely of the statements of the spirit in these conferences and commitments made by the Chinese governments which consist of detailed plans and strategies (China's 2003:7-8).

“In 1993, the development targets of ‘basically universalizing 9-year compulsory schooling and basically eradicating illiteracy among young and middle-aged adults’ (“two basics”) were set” (China's 2003:14) and the two targets were given high priority on the 1994 National Conference on Education (ibid). The “two basics” are the two most important strategies on educational development in China with the former one (universalizing 9-year compulsory schooling) responding to the international concern of the abolition of primary education tuition fees. The working system for the “two basics” is described as follows: the national government responsible for policy guiding, setting up a coordinating group or steering group at each level, by members drawn mainly from the educational department, cooperated with other NGOs and institutions (China's 2003:18). Responding to the MDGs and China's own “two basics” educational goals, China is receiving essential help from UNESCO, UNDP, UNICEF and the World Bank. Together with international aid, Chinese national government is adjusting its domestic resources redistribution to education development which is gradually more biased to the poor areas in China's west (China's 2003:19).

b. *The gap between rich and marginalized regions*

Indeed, an inequality of educational development between China's wealthier and more marginalized regions and rural and urban spaces exist with a variety of reasons, among which is the differing attention from the governments. As urban development, including the educational section, is usually the focus of policy-making and implementation, rural development has a high possibility to be neglected. In old ideas, urban development represents the level of development in one particular region as urban space has advantaged conditions for improvement in all kinds. Thus the majority of resources and finance tend to be transferred to the urban areas for its rapid growth; on the contrary, rural development would be hindered by a lack of necessary resources and remain always left behind. On the educational section, urban education receives more attention and supports from governments which results in certain ignorance and inadequate assistance for the rural side.

However, Fu (2005) indicates that “the government should not shed the



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responsibility of providing equal education opportunities for rural residents in the name of limited resources” (Fu 2005:4). In order to promote the overall primary education enrolment rate, rural primary education, which belongs to the disadvantaged side, needs to catch up with particular government supports like favored policies. Therefore the readjustment and reforms of distribution on educational resources is urgent for the government policy making and implementation.

For the better development of rural and disadvantaged groups of school-aged children, several policies and projects from the 21<sup>st</sup> century were carried out: a) Rural Boarding School Project, modern distance education, school housing rehabilitation and campus safety project, b) Reforms of compulsory primary education financial guarantee system, c) Funding for students from low-income households Project (China News 2012). Another action of the national institution is the declaration by the Ministry of Education of People’s Republic of China, that China’s primary education dropout rate has been controlled steadily within 1% in recent years (China News 2012). However, the ministry announces that since dropout rate has been controlled effectively, annual dropout rate of primary education in China is not going to be released to public any more, though it is still a focused work of education development due to a large population basis (ibid). Other alternative programs created by the governments consist of adult literacy courses, technical training programs for special workforce skills which are all conducive for those who have low education adults to enroll more efficiently into the markets and production.

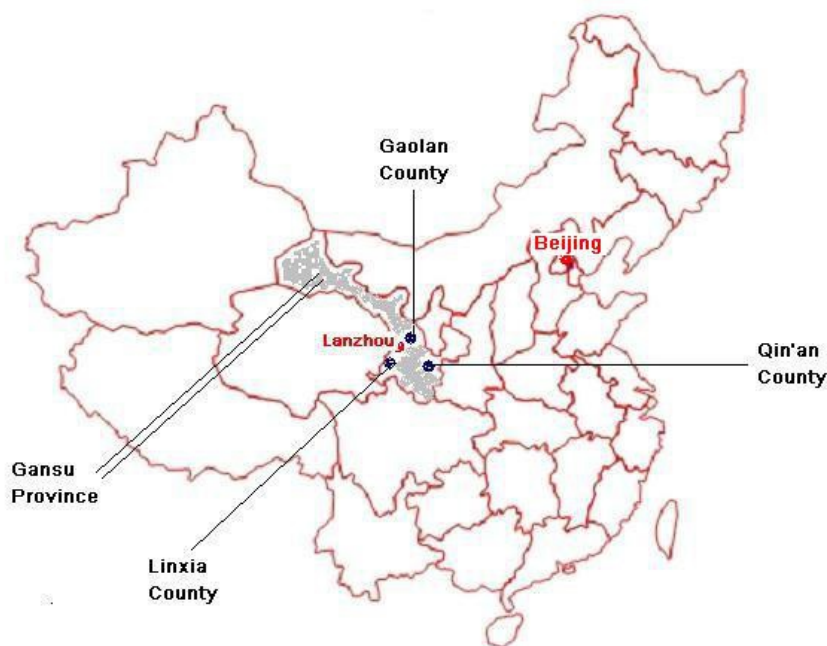
c. *Decentralization and regional differences*

While realizing the diverse conditions in all different provinces and smaller areas (such as cities, counties), the National Government has formulated power-distribution strategies to lower level governing institutions. For instance, the paper of China’s Action Plan for Education for All indicates that “it is imperative to give full consideration to the realities of various regions in setting goals for educational development by conducting regional planning and providing differentiated guidance in the light of local conditions” (China’s 2003:17). The detailed plan for the realization of the 9-year basic compulsory education sets different goals for different regions: better developed eastern regions (inhabited by 85% of the national population) should complete a 9-year compulsory primary schooling; the intermediate socio-economic level central regions (inhabited by 10% of the national population) should complete 5-6 years; the underdeveloped western regions (inhabited by 5% of the national population) should complete 3-4 years of primary schooling for children (China’s 2003:17-18). These plans have been gradually implemented and achieved during the following decade.

Moreover, the vital importance of decentralization has been noticed that lower levels of governments ought to have more power of policy controlling while they

have better knowledge and information on local conditions and demands. It is suggested that “local governments assume the main responsibility with suitable division of labor under the general guidance of the state council, with the county government undertaking the main obligations” (China’s 2003:33). Also, Tsang (1996) summarizes that a financial reform on basic education in China is necessary. “In moving away from a centralized financing system, the education reform gives lower levels of government the power, responsibility and incentives to mobilize government resources for education” (Tsang 1996:16).

In addition, many local governments of small towns and cities have responded to the national ideology of focused education development. Examples include many counties in Gansu Province (See Map 3): Gaolan County which transferred the original financing for the construction of a central-park to new school buildings after being affected by the earthquake in 2008; Qin’an County, which offered free school books and materials to around 117,000 students among the urban poor and disabled ones; and Linxia County which carried out the principles to avoid disordered charge of extra education fees (Xinhua Net 2008).



Map 3. Gansu Province

Within the implementation rules of Compulsory Education in Shanxi Province (See Map 1), it indicates that: apart from book fees and accommodation fees, no other fees could be charged in any forms within the policy of free compulsory primary education; the compulsory education law has to be implemented strictly and legally; no additional profit can be made by educational institutions (Linqi

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County Education 2012).

To improve equal development of both rural and urban primary education, four projects were brought up in Zhejiang Province in 2012, namely “aiding poor students, nutrition meals, improvement of food and accommodation, improvement of teachers’ quality”(Liang 2008). Each city was investing large amount of capital in implementing these projects with the assistance from the province (ibid).

d. *The 9-year compulsory primary education in China*

It is worth mentioning of the significant 9-year compulsory primary education strategy (which intended to encourage both children and governments to get more students involved into primary education, but it was not free in the beginning of the strategy) in China which finally reached the goal of free basic education for all kids in 2006 and made a great contribution to promote enrolment of primary schooling on a national scale. It is probably more complex than people usually tend to think how it is working; for example, it does not necessarily mean that every school-aged child would be able to go to school unconditionally.

At earlier times, 9-year compulsory primary education was a national policy carried out on promoting primary education agenda and encouraging all regions to make children into schooling, but not free. A brief view of the procedure of the abolition of primary school fees is described as follows: the year of 2006 saw the formation of the law which firstly emphasized free primary education for school-aged children in Western China; in 2007, free primary education for school-aged children in Central and Eastern China was determined; finally, in 2008, public finance for primary education had reached all rural districts.

Still, it should be noticed that the abolition of 9-year compulsory primary school fees does not mean that students need not pay any fees at all; instead, some necessary fees of subjects’ books, materials and services are still charged, with a much smaller amount than before. This is also due to the potential financial scarcity after the abolition of school fees. Students and parents are all glad of the free primary education policy, especially for those who live in low-income households from China’s central and west regions and rural areas. In some wealthier provinces like Guangdong, which receive large amount of migrants from outside and poorer regions, the governments have not neglected the children of the migration labors. Their children are usually well allocated to different schools and of course free of charge. Greater motivation for receiving primary education drives more children into schools, including those who have dropped out, and the enrolment increases dramatically nation-wide.

The abolition of primary school fees for school-aged children is a great relief for children from many low-income households. However, on the other hand, the loss from free schooling is a big challenge for schools and that requires much stronger

financial support from governments. It is seen as a difficult work for the transformation and sometimes the unreasonable distribution and management can lead to education chaos. Therefore the governments, including national and local ones, ought to have a strong institutional system to organize and implement financial distribution for supporting primary schools' development.

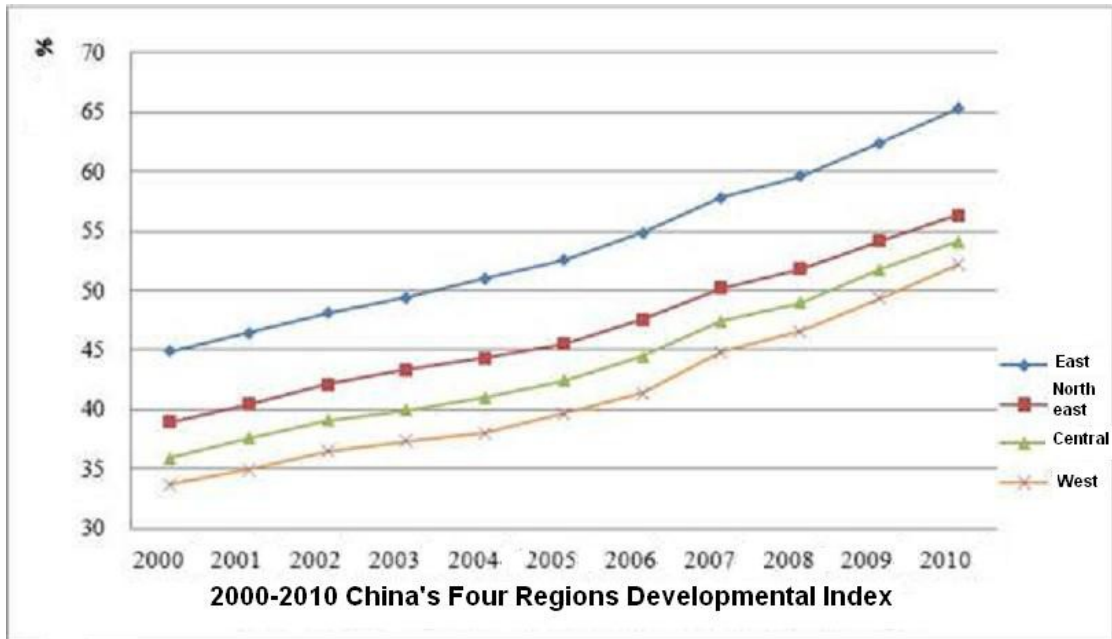
### 5.3 *Influences of local economical and cultural backgrounds for primary education development*

#### a. *Economical relations*

Primary education improvement needs a strong support from local social development, with economical influences as one main factor. Regions with different development levels usually have different educational standards. It is not difficult to observe that richer areas tend to have a higher level of educational development, with more required finance and resources to support education promotion. In the case of China, regional and rural-urban disparities on education development occur on a wide range (policy supports, financial investment, education quality, learning outcomes, etc.), which should take the different economical conditions into account for analysis.

According to Fu (2005), "average urban incomes are more than four times higher than average rural incomes, when considering all the subsidies that urban residents receive for housing, medicine and education" (Fu 2005:2). Higher households' incomes enable urban families to invest more on children's education development and maintain a stable financial support for children's comprehensive improvement of their growing up. However, by 2006, national investment into rural education only constituted 23% of the total share of GDP; and the rural population has usually much lower education level than the urban one (Huang 2010).

Taking a look at economic growth in China's eastern, central, western and north-eastern parts, the observation from a report shows that the respectively annual rural output of GDP in China's eastern, central, western and north-eastern parts were around 1,300 billion yuan, 1,050 billion yuan, 1,000 billion yuan and 340 billion yuan (China.com.cn 2011). Their rural income per capita was respectively about 8,000 yuan, 5,500 yuan, 4,400 yuan and 6,500 yuan with the growth rate of 13.8%、15%、15.8% and 17.9% respectively (ibid). Each part is growing rapidly but eastern China is still leading far ahead (See Figure 1). Until 2010, China has become one of the nations which have the widest urban-rural economic gap in the world (China.com.cn 2011). On the other hand, "in 2012, the urban annual income per household (24,565 yuan) was still more than three times higher than the rural one (7,917 yuan) which was 3.10:1 (China Economy 2013)".



**Figure 1. 2000-2010 China's Four Regions Developmental Index**  
(National Bureau of Statistics of China 2011)

For the investment in education, eastern China is usually receiving one or two times more than the western part. For a long time period, education has been focusing on urban areas. “The difficulty in providing quality rural primary education lies in the unsettled financial relationship between the centre and the localities, resulting in a shortage of educational funding and resources in rural areas” (Fu 2005:4). With the development strategies of reforms and opening up to outside world and the transformation from planned economy to market-driven economy, China’s socio-economic development has advanced rapidly, especially in the east. Illiterate population is usually found in the poor western regions (China’s 2003:23).

The inadequate financial capacity is the essential factor of educational backwardness with a lack of proper investment. In some underdeveloped provinces in China, such as Guangxi Province (See Map 1), the share of the total GDP on education is actually above the national average proportion; however, the absolute amount of income is still much lower than other wealthier provinces and it determines the remaining weakness of local education construction that the financial inadequacy could not take the pressure of 9-year compulsory primary education. Apart from local economical improvement and government financial supports to especially the marginalized and rural regions in China, it is also suggested that “additional financial support is expected from different social forces” (Fu 2005:6) which calls for external financial aid from other social sectors, such as NGOs and private sectors.

The urban bias seems to be unavoidable. Urban education is usually the center of

education development and urban schools usually have much better school facilities, teaching quality and therefore, learning outcomes and achievements. Children who sit in clean and high-equipped classrooms and enjoy high technical teaching facilities are usually those from urban wealthier families. The poorer places have lower levels of education development; in the same way, lower-income households tend to have worse situation on their education improvements. Rural and marginalized children often have lower-income backgrounds which reduce the opportunities for them to receive proper education. Being poor in many families, parents tend to keep children at home, helping with housework or extra income and save the expenditure for daily use. This issue is also based on the situation that urban households tend to have few children than the rural ones.

b. *Cultural relations*

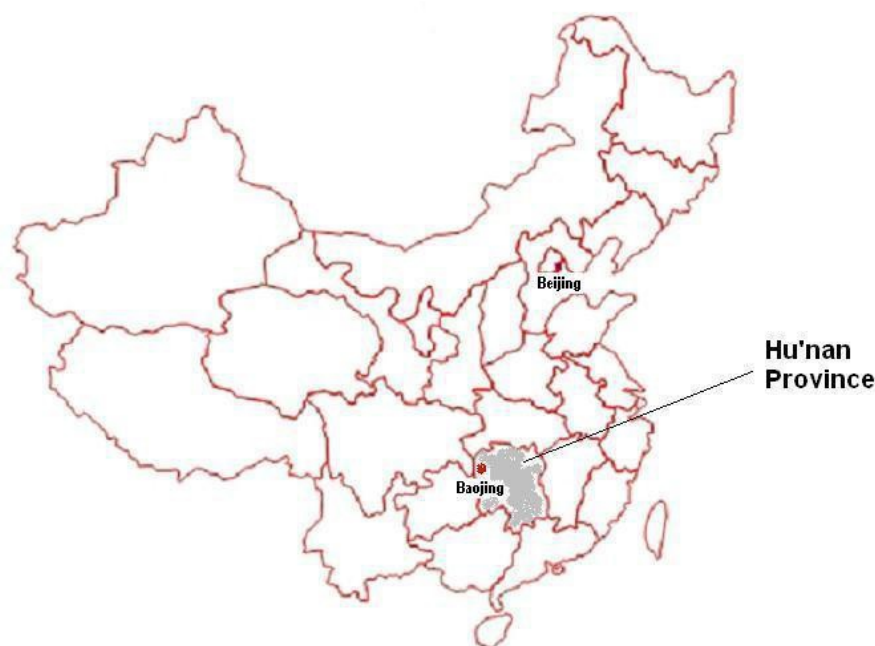
Poor regions tend to have a lower level of education overall and local people, especially in the countryside, are more likely to hold the dated and negative attitudes towards education. Many rural parents would have the ideas that education is not the only path for finding good jobs for children. Instead of sending children to school, they might support the children to drop out from schools to society and find some jobs with certain skills. It not only saves the expense for education, but probably also rises the family income. When a farmer was asked how much schooling he thought they needed, the answer turned out to be that “it is enough as long as one can read road signs and do simple calculations so that he knows whether he gets the right wages” (Liu 2004:14). Such ideas are not rare in many poor regions in China, particularly in rural places in the west. The significance of education can hardly receive notice and the rooted ideas are difficult to change.

During the study of remote villages in Yunnan Province by Chung & Mason (2012), a student called Liu Zhi was interviewed and studied carefully. Liu Zhi is a student with a lack of interest in school learning and has pretty bad performance in school. Both teachers and parents have low expectations on him and wish him not to cause troubles at school. Liu Zhi’s mother has barely any education experience and both of them regard education as useless since Liu Zhi does not do well at school and has no beneficial achievement from education (Chung & Mason 2012:4). On the contrary, with the investigation on parents in urban cities with much higher education levels, it is found that urban children receive a lot more care and support from parents. For instance, they would not only be sent to good-quality schools but also to private teaching institutions or tutors for further study. Despite the study pressure problem, urban children who have parents with better educational backgrounds can obtain much higher-quality of education experience. Usually, these urban households have higher standard of living as well (ibid).

Also, the situation that students who drop out from schools can always find some

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kinds of jobs is the practical reason of the ignorance on schooling. According to a survey of 35 dropout students in Baojing County (one of the center counties of national anti-poverty projects), Hu'nan Province where there lived many Miao minority people in 2006 (See Map 4), 80% of them migrated to big cities with parents or relatives for finding jobs; 10% of them even had no information on where they had gone; the remaining 6 students were with their parents doing small jobs for a living in nearby towns. To people's surprises, these students entered into the low-waged jobs in many factories without any registration or formal paths and some of them had not even reached the legal age of employment. These factories hired the dropout students with low payment in order to receive maximum profits and it was against certain laws for protecting teenagers' right (Xinhua Net 2006). The phenomenon implies the disordered system of employment and primary education which requires the governments and relevant institutions to attach greater attention.



Map 4. Baojing County in Hu'nan Province

The cultural environment for educational development is of great significance while education itself is a kind of culture spreading. It is crucial to motivate the vast population (especially the rural and marginalized inhabitants) of their desire for knowledge and technical skills to get involved into education systems, spread the cultural benefits and set role models from regions with better education performances. With the improvement of individual capacity in all kinds, people are more welcomed into the market and treated with better employment. It is conducive for social stability and equity with people getting dignity and higher social status. Therefore the ideological enlightenment is necessary and urgent to

spread the essential role of education (especially the fundamental role of primary education) for both individuals and social development.

#### 5.4 *Education quality disparities*

On the Dakar Forum, it was emphasized that “all aspects of quality of education which include literacy, numeracy and essential life skills” (China’s 2003:7) have to be improved for a comprehensive educational promotion. With China’s rapid economical growth and higher living standard, the pace and natural growth rate of population has declined; thus the requirement of higher education quality for children becomes strong. Entering the 21<sup>st</sup> century, China started to have some new strategies for primary education, including paying more attention to children’s health care in primary education system, as well as exploring new ways of expanding pre-primary education and childhood care like adjusting allocation and distribution of kindergartens in different sizes (China’s 2003:15). Other works have been done as well: it is not difficult to find that in many rural areas in China, the school buildings are the best construction within the whole countryside district, for instance.

Investment and financial support need to guarantee three aspects: school buildings and classrooms, teacher and administration staff salary, teaching material and equipments. Also, children’s daily health care is one of the key factors ensuring education quality and is also the requirement for students’ protection and right. In Yunnan Province (See Map 5), the government’s policy emphasizes the crucial significance in students’ healthy meals and food in schools. Apart from providing financial support to different cities, each city has their own specific support for local primary schools’ improvement, especially in rural areas. For example, in Chuxiong City, in order to promote school children’s nutrition, the government decided to offer 600 yuan to every single student in rural schools every school year; this affected about 40,000 students in total and cost a bit more than 26 million yuan. In Wenshan City, for the Improvement of Nutrition Project for students, the local government set the principles of “fast speed, effective method, good quality” and 156 rural primary schools have reached the standard of healthy meals for school children (Chinese Radio Network 2012).





**Map 5. Yunnan Province**

Nevertheless, huge disparities still exist. For instance, while wealthier urban schools may have received billions of investment for its “demonstrational school” building, some rural children are having classes in dilapidated houses; while urban children have the opportunities of enjoying high standard school gyms and swimming pools, there is even a severe lack of enough books and materials for rural students and teachers (Zheng 2009:1). Similarly, teaching facilities and qualities are basically much better in eastern China than some remote western regions; sometimes they could not even be compared. Eastern schools usually have everything for high standard and technological teaching conditions; however, many remote western schools do not even have stable desks and an unbroken roof for classrooms. On the teachers’ educational backgrounds, in western China, less than half of the teachers in their 9-year primary educational schools had undergraduate degrees; urban teachers, on the contrary, had 82.5% (Huang 2010).

Learning outcomes vary from different geographical spaces. Jiayi Wang, who is the Vice President of North-West Normal University and devoting himself in China’s rural education development researches, has conducted a professional study on disparities of educational quality on learning outcomes among several rural, town-based and urban-centered schools in Gansu Province (a western province in China with relatively low living standards) (See Map 1). The results show that urban children have much higher scores and learning achievements in Chinese and mathematics, the two main subjects in school teaching. The urban

students' achievement rate on Chinese subject is 27.1% higher than the rural ones; the rural excellent rate is almost 0% but the urban students could reach 56.1% (Zhao 2009). On math, the achievement rate gap is 28.4%. Also, in regards of learning skills, rural children tend to use mechanical memorizing during learning process in all subjects which lead to the fact that they keep the concepts in mind but seldom really understand (ibid). For instance, rural students write Chinese passages with few creative ideas and massive writing mistakes; in mathematics, rural students find it quite difficult to work out puzzles with practical use of math theories and knowledge (ibid). The phenomenon can happen among urban students as well but to a lesser degree.

Wang also did investigation on teacher resources in these different schools as he believed that there must be disparities between faculty forces which would contribute much to quality differences. Not surprisingly, according to the observation on teachers, rural primary schools usually have teachers whose educational backgrounds are relatively low, sometimes to only high school levels (ibid). On the contrary, the majority of urban teachers have completed university education which forms a huge gap between those in rural schools. Moreover, teachers' professional counterparts could also be an important factor influencing teaching quality. For example, within one rural primary school investigated, there are only three math teachers, two of whom are originally majored in accounting and computer science respectively, and only one is majored in mathematics (ibid). The lack of strong faculty strength leads to little motivation of teaching research activities to improve teaching skills, and therefore widens the gap in teaching quality between rural and urban primary education (ibid).

Indeed, one of the key factors affecting the increasing disparity on education quality in wealthier and poorer regions is the teachers' quality. Due to the different economical conditions, urban and wealthier areas tend to offer much higher salary (one-third or even half higher) to teachers; this attracts better-educated teachers into urban schools. The situations result in the mobilization of teacher resources from small town-based and rural regions to urban regions, from central and western China to eastern China and other big cities like Guangdong and Beijing. For example, in Sichuan Province (in western China) in 2001, 61 senior advanced high school teachers transferred to other schools in eastern big cities (Zheng 2009:1). Some master and national teachers would be reserved by high-standard schools in some south-eastern cities along the coast when they are still under national professional training (ibid). On the contrary, in rural and western poor areas in China, substitute teachers are largely employed by various primary schools due to a lack of financial support (and to offer teachers enough salary). These substitute teachers are usually with lower educational backgrounds and they enter into the schools without formal recruitment systems and it leads to low learning outcomes for children. It is pointed out that "if the situation continues, rural education improvement would definitely decline and lose the

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required conditions for sustainable development” (ibid).

Another situation on teacher resource distribution of primary education in marginalized regions in China is that of the volunteer teachers. With the spreading of assistance to children in remote places, more and more college and university students are willing to help teach in those marginalized mountain villages as volunteer teachers. They usually spend one or two months (sometimes half a year or longer) teaching in the villages and leave. Their reflection shows that the living standard of those mountain villages is shockingly low: with even not enough drinking water and clean food, basic sanitation facility and health care. These volunteers may be somewhat assistance to the village children, but the short-term substitution of teacher is far from an ideal solution to the need of students there. Meanwhile, these marginalized village schools receive aid from outside society as well, such as school facilities (desks, chairs and books), clothes for children and fund.

The essential solution for educational marginalization with a lack of all teaching resources is to improve local economics and incomes for a higher standard of living for residents, so that adequate capital can be used to purchase basic teaching facilities for children and with a higher level of payment, more and better teachers would be attracted to make contributions.

### 5.5 ***The dropout problem***

#### a. *Challenges after the abolition of tuition fees for primary schooling*

Students’ dropping out from schools is another significant fact to consider education development. In recent years, the average primary education dropout rate has been controlled within 1% (it can also be found that regions with educational marginalization have higher dropout rates than the average while better-developed regions can have lower rates), according to China News (2012), mainly contributed by the free 9-year compulsory primary education. In earlier times, one of the most possible reasons for students’ dropping out was the household poverty. As Brown & Park (2002) points out, with mathematical methods, “controlling for expenditures per capita, children from households that are both poor and credit constrained are three times as likely to drop out of school” (Brown & Park 2002:16). The free primary schooling policy at least reduces the pressure for households which could not afford the tuition fees and more families send children to schools without financial worries. While primary school enrolment has been increasing rapidly and the official dropout rate is been controlled, the completion of a whole circle of primary schooling is still not satisfactory, nevertheless.

Challenges after the abolition of tuition fees for primary schooling lie in the non-functioning integration of schools which often combines two or more schools into

one due to the scarcity of finance or other reasons: the distance between home and school is longer; transportation and safety hazard increases; a lack of an adequate boarding school system emerges; the size of one class is too large. Moreover, many reports such as China Youth (2009), have summarized several points of shortcomings emerging after the policy of abolition of primary school fees which are the underlying causes of the increasing students' dropout rate. With the free 9-year compulsory primary education, students need not pay tuition fees any longer and especially for rural households which is a big relief. However, in many aspects, expenditure on children's education seems to be larger due to the non-functioning integration of schools.

1. Longer distance between home and school determines higher expense on living and food in school, daily and transportation spending. If the distance is too long to let children go alone, parents would choose to keep children company so that higher transportation and even renting fees have to be added. Therefore for some poor families, the extra expenditure is actually higher than the previous tuition fees.
2. There are severe concerns on students' safety with the longer distance to schools. In many disadvantaged rural regions, transportation system remains inadequate and unsafe: buses can be of low quality and roads can be rough and hard to walk.
3. Newly integrated schools could be truly disordered in teaching plans and resources. The relocation of students can cause an overwhelming size of classes with inadequate teaching space, facilities and teachers. Previous rural teachers are transferred to different schools with diverse quality and that produces massive inefficiency. In addition, the lack of financial assistance is also one of the reasons. (China Youth 2009)

Under such complex pressure, many poor rural households could hardly bear the extra concerns and obstacles and that usually result in a sad fact of children's dropping out from schools. In response to these emerging problems, several policies were made for possible solutions:

1. Readjustment of school distribution and integration for children to receive good quality of education at nearby environments
2. Building the electronic student registration management system (for strengthening the supervision of students' transferring and migration)
3. Improving the funding for students from low-income households system
4. Improving campus management (for students' safety, connection with parents, reducing students' learning pressure and more care for students' physical and mental health) (China News 2012)

b. *The problematic educational pattern and individual unwillingness*

One other cause for rural students' dropout lies in the so-called Chinese exam-oriented education pattern. Exam-oriented education pattern puts students' scores and grades on subjects as the first and most important standard and indication of

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education quality with the most used method, examination. The education pattern can easily neglect students' other abilities and development aspects, as well as health and hobbies. The description of the education pattern draws people's attention: "students come to schools with stars above, go home with the moon ahead and swim in the ocean of exam paper" (Xinhua Network 2006). Particularly in rural education, it is because the exam-oriented education pattern requires students to have high scores on exams and ignore students' true ability and mental health; thus teachers' and students' spare time has to be sacrificed to achieve the high marks. In this case, a large number of school children feel exhausted, impatient and uninterested in schooling. Linked to temptations in society, situation would surely occur where students drop out from schools and become unemployed. 70% of these students would find a low-wage job or do farm work with parents at home; the other 30%, however, would step into society and kill time in net bars, etc (ibid).

Additionally, another situation worth mentioning is that a great number of children would leave school right after they finish the 9-year compulsory education. One of the various reasons lies in the rigid education system as well. Usually, within a county, schools would be ranked among all which would play a big part for parents to choose schools for children. Therefore all schools are pursuing good results of students' passing the public examination and different methods are applied. Often, after the first entering exam, a certain number of students would be luckily picked out and gathered in a specially focused class with the best teachers to work for a common and clear goal: to pass the final public examination. The implication leaves the rest of the students that they have little hope to pass the final exam for a further and better education. The consequence shows that students who drop out or quit school once finishing the primary education are usually from those average classes (Liu 2004:15). The unbalanced education system distinguishes students in different categories which directly affect students' self-value and potential motivation to leave schools.

According to the research of Liu (2004), it is found that the reason mostly mentioned of students' dropping out of school is "tired of study" (Liu 2004:12). Many students tend to consider schools as "no fun" and "school life is too hard" (ibid:10). The society may have to reconsider the teaching system and patterns for students' learning.

Also, an ethnographic study in several remote mountain villages in Yunnan province was conducted as mentioned in previous sections, more complex socio-economic and cultural factors are discovered to explain students' dropout in marginalized regions in China which "cannot be revealed by the official 1% dropout rate" (Chung & Mason 2012:1). Apart from household poverty and low quality of schools, individual unwillingness associated with negative cultural environments and values is another important factor. As mentioned above, Liu

Zhi, who was mainly interviewed during the ethnographic study, has a bad performance at school while involving himself into fighting, bullying and even stealing. He regards himself as bad at studying and education as useless; he causes troubles and teachers and parents all lose expectations on him; his house is burnt down and classmates laugh at him because his family becomes poorer; he is so unwelcomed at school and even the teacher tells him to leave school. Thus Liu Zhi's dropping out from schools seem to be an inevitable result. All these disadvantaged living and schooling environments and surroundings are strong elements which people should consider deeply of the dropout problem in many marginalized regions in China, since Liu Zhi is never the only case as such (ibid:3).

Thus it is suggested that the reform of China's educational system is urgent. China's education should change the old pattern to a more comprehensive and proper modern one which cares more about students' mental health with a humanistic education model. Other alternatives should be approached as well. For those who are likely to leave schools and drop academic learning, the governments ought to arrange other teaching programs for them, mostly about special and vocational courses.

#### 5.6 ***The gender issues***

Both in the Millennium Development Goals and Dakar Forum, women's empowerment and girls' equal right to education are strongly emphasized. In China, women usually constitute the majority of the illiterate adult population and girls are often more than boys among the children who are left out from schooling and dropping out (China's 2003:16). According to 2008 China's General Social Survey, gender bias problems exist more in rural population than the urban one in China. Various reasons include parents' education levels and the size of a family (Wu 2012:1). "Those who live in the countryside, who have low socio-economic status, whose parents have less education, and who have more siblings" (ibid) have a higher tendency to make girls suffer from the gender bias on receiving educational opportunities.

Some data can be found on the public statistics source from Ministry of Education of People's Republic of China which indicates that: by 2010, primary education (9-year) had female students about 71 million with the proportion of 47% women; urban female students were 45.7% of the total students in 1-6 grades schools while the rural ones were 46.8%; urban female students were 46.7% of the total students in 7-9 grades schools while the rural ones were 47.7% (MOE). Also, by 2010, the sixth nationwide population census showed that Chinese female population proportion was around 48.7% (Changcheng Network 2011) which implied that the gender distribution of female enrolment in primary schooling corresponded to the general gender situation. From the statistics presented, within the 9-year compulsory primary

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education, female students are fewer than the male students but gender bias is not a big problem in the primary educational level in both rural and urban areas. In the meantime, it is measured on the national level and regional differences still exist.

According to Brown & Park (2002), the gender selection researches in poor counties in six Chinese provinces show that “poorly performing girls drop out in primary school while boys do not begin to drop out in earnest until junior secondary school” (Brown & Park 2002:16). A gender biased investment in households exists which is probably due to “lower returns to education for girls, the lower selfish returns to parents from investing in girls that will marry into other families, or from parental preferences that favor sons” (ibid), especially in rural and poorer areas. It is also discovered that women’s empowerment contributes a lot to the increasing education enrolment rate, while the dropout rate is reduced largely when more girls are involved into schooling (ibid).

In regard of China’s gender bias on primary education development, there is less relevant information and few researches. Possible reasons could be that gender problems have been well reduced within the primary education section (it might be worse in higher education levels) with the implementation of 9-year free compulsory primary education policy; or there is a lack of adequate statistics and database which leads to a small number of relevant researches.

## **6 A Brief Case Study in Quzhou, Zhejiang, China**

As introduced, a small case study has been conducted on education development in Quzhou, Zhejiang, a small city along the south-east coast in China. Basic information on Quzhou development will be presented, associating with the educational conditions. Several questionnaires were delivered to different educational sectors in Quzhou, including primary school headmasters and school children. Replies have been collected and analyzed for useful information.

Constraints within the brief case study have to be well explained. Firstly, due to the distance and time limits, the questionnaires were distributed by my mother, who currently works at the governmental Official Record Office in Quzhou and has the possibility to reach different leaders in primary schools, to selected respondents. Therefore, not a large amount of questionnaires were possible to deliver and only some certain school leaders, school children were taking parts. The replies would not be representative and may not be totally comprehensive: there might be other potential opinions and ideas which could be reached. However, these responses could at least present some ideas and opinions from various dimensions while they are also part of the local educational system and can reflect some aspects of China’s education development.

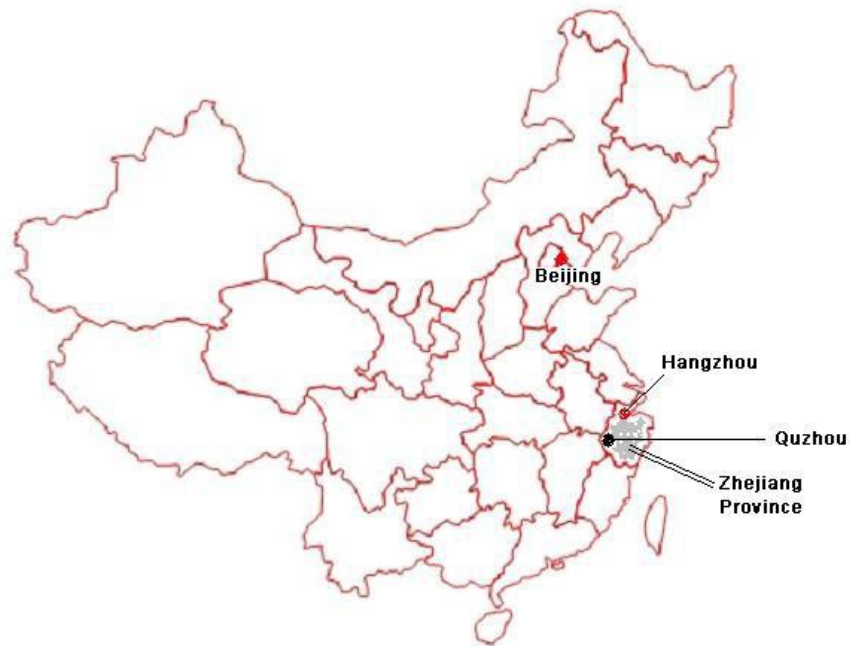
Secondly, resources and information on Quzhou education development are actually plentiful; however, statistics and other data basically show its development in the past. A lot of official statistics, reports and researches can be found on the Quzhou Education network but it is likely to be a historical record and more recent data seems to be missing.

Finally, there is a concern from these respondents that negative answers would probably have bad influences on China's visions to the outside world as the school leaders knew that it was for an educational thesis in the western society. It interestingly shows that a cultural blocking and public concerns of speaking negatively of social development exist in China's society; it is also a sign of culture differences and a lack of a more liberal educational pattern and system, due to certain constraints within the general national political atmosphere in China.

### ***6.1 Quzhou Backgrounds***

Quzhou is a small prefecture-level city located in the west of Zhejiang Province in China, along the south-east coast (See Map 6). It has six county districts with Kecheng County which is the center one of Quzhou City. The city occupies 8,841 square kilometers with a population of more than 2.5 million (genders generally evenly split and rural population around 80%) (Quzhou 2012). By 2012, the total GDP Quzhou made had reached about 98 billion yuan (around 40,000 yuan per capita) and increased by 8.7% per year, ranking it the 183th out of 660 cities in China (GDP per capita ranking the 148th) and the 9<sup>th</sup> out of 11 cities in Zhejiang (GDP per capita ranking the 10th) (ibid). As could be seen, Quzhou is a city of one of the richest provinces in China which determines its relatively high level of economic development; however, it is also ranked as almost the last in Zhejiang Province. Bearing both the characteristics of being developed in a national-wide scale and "backward" compared to other richer cities in Zhejiang, a brief investigation into its educational system would be interesting.





**Map 6. Quzhou in Zhejiang Province**

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Quzhou is a deep cultural and historical city with its strong and long-developing education construction. In 2008, there were 1,417 primary schools (including kindergartens) in use and about 400,000 students involved in primary education (Quzhou Education<1> 2008). Inspiringly, primary education completion rate reached almost 100% (Quzhou Education<2> 2008). Beyond the 9-year compulsory primary education policy, Quzhou set its education development goal as universalizing 15-year education (adding 3-year pre-primary schooling and 3-year post-primary schooling) (Zhejiang Metro 2006). Entering the new century, more efforts and attempts were starting to be devoted into educational development: No.1 Middle School was replaced into a newly opened campus with new and advanced buildings and school equipments (Quzhou Education<3> 2006); Shiyuan School was totally renovated for more advantaged school facilities, including computer rooms, swimming pools and stadiums (ibid); school areas were increased largely in the whole city and more financial support was offered; the government also strengthened vocational education, aiming at the building its own educational brand of “made in Quzhou” (China Basic Education 2008).

While urban primary education has received massive support and attention from governments, rural-urban gap ought to be concerned. Primary schooling enrolment keeps increasing in rural areas but teaching quality still needs to catch up with the urban one, as a summary from recourses found. Urban schools in Quzhou are often seen as advanced and equipped with technological facilities which benefit the urban children for better learning experiences a lot. However, in comparison, many poor

rural schools even have to renovate the classrooms and buildings for children's safety. The best teachers are usually in the top urban schools and rural teachers' quality can be quite diverse. Thus the rural education's catching up has to become the following central work of Quzhou education development.

From 2003, Quzhou government initialized the project of free primary education for children in extremely low-income households ahead of the national policy of abolition of primary schooling fees in 2006 (China Basic Education 2008); 11.57 million yuan was invested into renovation of 476 wells in rural school areas for rural students and teachers' safe drinking water (ibid); 16.98 million yuan was used to improve toilets conditions and sanitation in 428 rural primary schools (ibid). Besides, children belonging to disadvantaged groups (disabled and minority children) received crucial attention and support as well, with special schools built and tuition fees reduced or canceled.

## 6.2 *Analysis on Questionnaires Investigation*

In general, six rural school headmasters and two classes (with 43 and 42 students respectively) were asked to answer the questionnaires. It should be mentioned that all of these respondents do not wish to make their names public. Questionnaires would be presented in the end of the thesis.

### a. *School headmasters*

Generally, all school leaders regard primary education as essential in social development and consider current primary education in Quzhou as stably developing and the average level has reached the standard of Zhejiang Province which has a pretty high standard of education index. Rural and urban primary education gap is admitted, mainly on the aspect of school facilities, technological equipments and more importantly, teacher resources. In addition, the loss of excellent students of rural schools (transferring of excellent students to urban schools) is also mentioned by one headmaster which constrains the teaching quality overall; the inadequate care for teachers is one rural education problem as well; rural children receive less support and concerns from their families. In Quzhou, as the urban primary education has reached a relatively satisfying level, more attention has been transferred to reduce the crucial rural-urban gap. Basically, more investment is put into rural education construction and rural-urban cooperation is largely enhanced, mainly on teachers' communication and assistance and support floating to rural schools.

All school leaders appreciate governments' policies and supports in general. Governments and educational departments play a vital role in guidance and supervision as well as providing required resources and supports to school development. In the meantime, they also raise some suggestions for governments' work and policy-support they hope for. One headmaster indicates that

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governments should give rural primary schools more autonomy and power for decision-making while offering financial support and strategy guidance; other suggestions point out the necessity to raise the standard of teachers' salary which should not be lower than government officers and control the improper phenomenon of "choosing the best school".

Moreover, closer rural-urban cooperation deserves more attention, not only on finance assistance and teacher communication but also rural and urban children interactions. Students' physical and mental health should be a vital work for school development, with improving school medical service system and psychological guidance and counseling. The governments should pay more attention to children of rural migrants and migrant labors from other cities in order to obtain rural-urban equality in primary schooling. Also, improving distance learning, vocational courses and adult literacy schools are helpful alternative methods to raise the overall educational level.

On the issue of gender disparity, five out of six headmasters express that there is no such problem any longer in Quzhou, no matter on governments', schools' or the parents' sides. Nevertheless, one headmaster explains that schools do not have any privilege on genders when receiving students; some rural families which have more than one child have the possibility to favor the boy(s) on educational opportunities. Those rural parents whose children have bad performance on studying would possibly give up on their education and let them dropout or whatever. These households mentioned are usually among the poorest regions in Quzhou.

b. *School children*

Two classes of children are asked to answer certain questions. The first class contains 23 boys and 20 girls while the other one has 23 boys and 19 girls (which show a relatively gender balance in schooling).

Within the first class, 93% of the students like their school life while the rest 7% feels average. 91% are satisfied with their classrooms and facilities while 88% have the wishes to improve their playground for PE class. Inspiringly, all students indicated that they get enough and pleasant care and support from parents on their education and they all like their school teachers and other faculty. 95% students do not have siblings or friends in school-age out of school; however, one child has a bigger sister who does not attend school any more due to a lack of talent and interest on study; another student has a neighbor child who has intelligence problems and economical shortage problem and is not attending school. In general, 79% students are satisfied with the school and the rest 21% have specific requirements on improving their playgrounds with plastic tracks.

In the other class, 93% students show their enjoyment towards schools and 91%

are satisfied with school facilities. As a matter of fact, 95% students like their teachers with the rest of 5% have other opinions. Fortunately, all students' families provide concerns and supports to their education and no one has any friends or siblings out of school. However, the whole class raises some requirement on school facilities and teaching skills which include the establishment of school dispensaries, improvement on staff and food of school canteens and promotion on dormitory equipment. In general, 88% of the students are satisfied with their schools and 12% indicate their unpleasant in some ways.

In summary, most school children involved are pleased with their school life and conditions, with mainly the concerns of improving certain school facilities. Gender disparity is not a big problem within primary education sector (but perhaps within higher education) and the dropout problem is still mainly due to individual reasons (which should also be associated with the defective educational system) and economical disadvantages. Rural schools still have the necessity to promote teaching equipments and better learning environment for students. The encouragement is that rural schools are putting more attempts into caring for children's comprehensive development, rather than merely study grades and scores.

## **7. Conclusion**

Education has received an increasing consensus that is one of the key solutions to various social development problems globally. Seen as a strong and vital path for empowerment and enlightenment, education lays the basis for both individuals and communities to participate into different and higher-level social activities. Not only knowledge, skills and ability to access information and other social sectors can be obtained through education, but also an important aspect of human right achievement is revealed by attaining education. In this case, primary education plays a more vital role in spreading education benefits which helps build the foundation of processing education; it is also the most possible level of education universalization in the whole world to make a larger population into benefiting from learning.

Entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universalizing primary education is set on the crucial position of the Millennium Development Goals agenda, with emphasizing the central role of primary education to realize the rest of the goals. United Nations organizations attach great importance to achieving the primary education goal and have valuable reports and documentation providing valid information and knowledge on various aspects of developing primary education. It is strongly indicated that primary schooling enrolment, as well as education quality, gender equity, children's health care should all be taken into consideration in achieving a comprehensive educational development. Besides, regional disparities exist on a large scale in the world,

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including rural-urban gaps which need to be seriously concerned. Education inequality can be reflected strongly by these regional disparities, while children in developed societies are enjoying advanced teaching environments and quality and producing high learning outcomes, those who live in poor areas are suffering from massive educational marginalization and even not attending schools at all. To make children belonging to the disadvantaged groups catch up with the pace of global education development is of crucial importance to an overall development, such as poverty reduction and gender equality.

Several issues are mentioned within the MDGs and other education conferences and events, as well as a variety of researches, including governments' policy support, influences of local economic and cultural development, education quality, the dropout problems and gender issues. These vital aspects of primary education development should get full attention in reducing regional and rural-urban gaps which also form the main research questions of the thesis. In the case of China which has a large geographical space with quite diverse conditions, national education improvement has been advanced a lot with the rapid economic growth, with, however, pretty unbalanced levels. Governments' policy-making should favor primary education construction in marginalized areas with more investment and guidance supports; local economic growth provides a significant financial basis for primary education, especially in rural and remote regions, and cultural enlightenment helps spread the ideas of obtaining education; improving education quality should include school environment and teacher resources promotion for disadvantaged groups; the dropout problem occurs mostly in marginalized and poor areas which deserves much more attention and assistance from social sectors; gender inequality is well reduced in the primary education sector, though still happening in some remote regions due to household poverty or Chinese antiquate ideas.

All of these existing obstacles are significant constrains for China's comprehensive primary education development. The regional, as well as rural-urban gaps are widely recognized in the education development field, including the rural school headmasters involved in the study. Inadequate finance and resources are the main constraints which lead to the less advanced learning conditions and outcomes. Nowadays, both governments and other social sectors start to pay more attention to primary education in poorer and rural areas for a more balanced development to benefit all. Illiteracy reduction, enrolment increase, quality promotion and gender bias reduction have been improved a lot in disadvantaged regions in China, with adopting valid ideas and suggestions from international guidance associated with China's own conditions. It is still a long way to go, but the significant achievement that China's primary education has obtained is inspiring and encouraging.

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## **Appendix: Questionnaires of the case study**

### ***Questionnaire 1.*** For Rural Primary School Headmasters

1. What kind of effects do governments and educational departments have on the school's development? What policies do you usually receive and what is the impact? What do you think of them?
2. What kind of policies or assistance from the government do you think are useful and significant for improving the school?
3. What do you think of the general condition of your school nowadays?
4. Do you think your school is offering good educational service to kids in nearby areas? What is the most important thing for the school and kids?
5. Compared to urban primary education, what do you think of the major differences between the education condition in rural regions and them? What are we missing? (Shortcomings. Or advantages?)
6. Are there gender problems in your school enrollment? I believe the school receive students regardless of gender but what about parents if you know anything about that?

### ***Questionnaire 2.*** For Rural Primary School Children

1. Do you like your school? Class? Teachers? Classmates?
2. Are you satisfied with the school facilities? (classroom, playground, dining hall, shops, campus and technology. Computers and electronic facilities?)
3. Are you satisfied with the faculty? (Teachers, advisors, headmasters, administrators?)
4. Do your parents support you to go to school? Do they care about your study?

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5. Do you have any siblings, cousins or friends you know that out of school? Why?
  6. Do you want your teachers and school improve more on teaching skills and facilities? What do you think the school should have more?
  7. In general, are you happy with your school?