*Governing Educational Desire: Culture, Politics, and Schooling in China.* Andrew B. Kipnis (2011). Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 205 pp. ISBN: 9780226437552

In this book, Andrew Kipnis continues his focus on China's educational landscape, this time through a careful consideration of "educational desire." The book is equal parts ethnography and theoretical exploration, the former a careful examination of the educational culture of a single county in eastern China's Shandong province, the latter a concern with culture, governance, and what Kipnis calls "emplacement."

Kipnis' anthropological research programme in Mainland China is entering its fourth decade and has covered a range of topics central to the politics of everyday life in China. These include but are not limited to considerations of peasanthood and filiality (1995), gift giving and *guanxi* (1996), and of most relevance to the book under review, governance and social change (2008). The length of Kipnis' immersion in Chinese society, his apparent facility with the language, the depth of his analysis, and his theoretical sophistication combine to lend an authority to his writings that make his conclusions difficult to dispute. Observers of Chinese society in general and of Chinese education in particular will find this latest text a worthy addition to the sociology and anthropology of Mainland China.

The book comprises four chapters in which Kipnis considers "the question of why high levels of educational desire have arisen in Zouping, Shandong, China and East Asia, and the theoretical intersection of the concepts of culture, governing, and emplacement are meant as mutually illuminating reflective foci" (p. 17). Fei Xiaotong's (1992, p. 65) image of the concentric ripples that emanate from a stone thrown in water brings order to a discussion that moves outward from local (Zouping) to provincial/national (Shandong/China) to regional (East Asia) to global. Here, dealing with the local involves a detailed look at the phenomenon of educational desire in the county of Zouping. Kipnis includes a non-teleological history of Zouping's educational development, details present-day educational financing and facilities, introduces readers to the glorification of scholastic achievement, and links the pursuit of glory to the intensification of all things education in present day Zouping.

Emplacing the local involves examining how Zouping is embedded within policy regimes of both provincial and national governments. Kipnis' description of the wrestling match between Zouping educational authorities and those of Shandong province over the implementation of *suzhi jiaoyu* (education for quality) reforms reminds us that local actors are neither completely unfettered nor entirely bound by the missives of the state. Particularly rewarding is the section on the effects of the one child policy with respect to intensification. Despite the overwhelming power of the provincial and national level governments, local bureaucrats, non-state actors, and individuals retain a high degree of agency. One is reminded of Zhang Xudong's (2008) caution against reducing "China" to an "imagined totality" defined by proclamations of its ruling elite.

The third concentric ring aims to "historicize educational desire" by considering the regional emplacement of Zouping and China within a more general East Asian tradition of governance. The East Asian emplacement receives surprisingly little attention in this effort. The focus, instead, remains squarely on the "cultural logics" of the "imperial governing complex", which is described through a five-pronged thematic framework comprising exemplarity (c.f. Bakken, 2000), examinations, "holistic hierarchy", "literary masculinity," and nation building (p. 91). Of these, exemplarity takes the lead. Kipnis provides examples of how the importance of both being a model and modeling oneself (or one's children) after exemplary figures and practices plays out in the teaching and learning of handwriting/calligraphy, in the dress and behavior of teachers, and the bodily habits of students. These practices are then linked to examinations as a technology of governing, to justification of politicosocial hierarchies, and to a subtle mode of nation building. With respect to this last theme, Kipnis helps

the reader to understand how non-compliance with contradictory curriculum and "atomizing, competitive pursuit of exam success" (p. 111) is not fatal to the aim of nation building. Indeed, common experience of a contradiction-riddled education is precisely the soil in which national solidarity takes root. Furthermore, apparently individualistic pursuits, such as enrollment in private tutoring, fall conveniently within a national rhetoric that sees self-improvement as essential to the success of the nation.

The final, fourth ring encompasses the ways in which the particularity of educational desire in Zouping represents a universal phenomenon in nominally similar socio-cultural formations. Here, Kipnis examines a number of possibilities, including theorizations of desire and hierarchy, "agrarian discipline," and linguistic nation building. This is a well-written and useful consideration that reminds us of the extent to which "the farthest West is but the farthest East" (Smith, 2008).

Overall, this is an erudite and illuminating text. Its portrayal of educational culture in China is detailed and carefully presented. The book's fundamental assertion, that a high level of educational desire is a central feature of Chinese society past and present, is difficult to dispute given the quantitative and qualitative evidence presented. That the book presents research conducted outside the major metropolises lends force to this claim. It will, however, lead some readers to suggest that Kipnis engages in the worst kind of cultural essentialism. Against the charge of Orientalism (Said, 1977), however, Kipnis grounds his assertions in his own survey and interview data and that of colleagues working in other parts of the Mainland. With great subtlety he hulls the common sense frames that limit outsiders' views of "Chinese" and/or "Asian" society/culture, and extracts from the kernel of truth at the core of all stereotypes the misrecognized complexity behind the desire for educational attainment.

It is on precisely this question of this complexity that I wish to forward a critique whose intention is to speculate on possible future research around educational desire. As stated above, Kipnis' starting point is to assert the fact of high educational desire and to wonder at its origins. This assertion is primarily a positive one, *i.e.*, it is based on empirical work confirming the presence of the phenomenon. But Kipnis also wants to ground this positive assertion in the absence of its opposite, *i.e.*, in the lack of evidence of *low* educational desire. He supports this negative claim by profiling various kinds of families who demonstrate how high educational desire cuts across social classes. A conversation with a hairdresser shows how respect for intellectual activity is high even when actual attainment is low. In defence of Kipnis' assertion, a couple of points should be made. First, his claim is very specific and, therefore, more narrow than the anecdotal evidence cited above suggests. Second, the claim is grounded in earlier (2001a, 2001b) work in which he explicitly develops a conceptual foundation that includes, importantly, an allowance for resistance in the absence of an anti-school counterculture.

Still, I wonder if Kipnis' conceptual delimitations make for a claim so narrow that he has defined out of existence precisely that thing that he might otherwise have found. After all, what he finds is little evidence of an anti-educational culture *like* those found in Australia, the UK, or the USA. An alternative explanation is that he has been looking for evidence of counter-cultures in a place and time where one would not expect to find such collective behaviours. Indeed, Kipnis does hint at such a possibility when he wonders about the effect that future lack of inter-generational socio-economic status/class mobility might have in terms of the development of school sub- and/or counter-cultures. Going back to the over-delimitation referred to above, what if school counter-cultures in China form around behaviours of a class other than "expressive individualism"? What if—and here I put forward a not entirely speculative possibility—the relevant counter-culture expresses itself not as overt defiance but, rather, as non-expressive withdrawal? Here the ethnographic eye might usefully focus on the daily, ubiquitous presence of "unschooled" children in the new Chinese urban streetscape as evidence that some undetected subculture based in principles other than desire for educational attainment exists in the

interstices of the society emerging from the ashes of Maoist egalitarianism.<sup>1</sup>

On precisely the point of a newly emerging society, Kipnis' claim about social mobility applied to the present seems less secure given that it is based on research conducted mainly in the 1990s and published in 2001. That he reasserts it ten years later in the context of research whose primary concern is something other than school counter-cultures causes me to wonder: what if the intergenerational stasis Kipnis' hinted at ten years ago is already a salient characteristic of the extant social realm? Furthermore, if this and the other conditions of possibility detailed in the previous paragraph have changed, would it not be more productive to seek a particularly Chinese manifestation of anti-schooling culture that would allow us to grasp something both profound and familiar (Bourdieu, 2003)?

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A version of this and the following paragraph appear on my blog on Chinese education and society, *a vocation of the heart* (Yochim, 2011).