

Power bases and power tensions

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Power Bases and Power Tensions:

A Critical Analysis of Education Inspection Policies and Practices in China

Abstract

The *2010-2020 National Education Development Plan* outlines that inspection offices shall gain a more autonomous status to monitor education bureau's administration and the teaching performance of schools in China. Meanwhile, inspectors are puzzled by how to develop the inspection system under these new policy guidelines. One major struggle is how to re-adjust the power relations among education bureaux, inspection offices, and schools. This study explores the power bases and power tensions among these three key actors.

The typology of six bases of social power was used as the analytical and empirical framework of this study. Employing critical policy analysis, the author scrutinised 13 inspection policy documents on national, municipal, and district levels. Eight expert interviews conducted with inspectors from two districts in Shanghai, China, were then examined using thematic analysis.

Findings categorise and illustrate the six power bases (i.e. reward, coercive, legitimate, referent, expert, and informational power) belonging to the education bureaux, inspection offices, and schools, respectively. Three types of power tensions can be discerned from the interviewees, including the education bureau's informational power versus inspection office's legitimate power, inspectors' expert power versus their referent power, and school's expert power versus inspection office and education bureau's legitimate power.

This study concludes that China is developing a high-stakes accountability-based inspection system similar to those of England and the Netherlands. This type of inspection imposes more pressure on inspectors and schools to deliver outcomes that satisfy prescribed educational goals. Education bureaux remain powerful in the inspection triangle.

Keywords: Education inspection, ideology, power, China, critical policy analysis, expert interviews

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Introduction

Education inspection has traditionally been under-developed and, consequently, under-studied in the Chinese context (Tian and Lan, 2020). To elevate the status of inspection offices, in 2010 the Ministry of Education announced a major reform of the system.

According to the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, inspection offices should gain a more independent and professional status. The goal was to form an inspection triangle consisting of inspection offices (education evaluation), education bureaux (education management), and schools (education provision). After a decade long policy implementation period, this national development plan ended in 2020. A review of the changes in the policies and practices applied by inspectors in China is therefore timely. In this study, the author aims to answer two research questions. *In the Chinese education system, what types of power are exercised by education bureaux, inspection offices, and schools, respectively? What kinds of power tensions are recognised by the inspectors and how do they respond to them?*

This article consists of seven parts. It begins with a literature review on education inspection and its practice in different countries. The historical development of the Chinese education inspection system and its current challenges is then presented. This is followed by an explanation of how communism and neoliberalism have shaped inspection policymaking and

practices. The fourth part introduces the taxonomy of six bases of social power that form the analytical framework used. The methodology is then outlined, including both data collection and analytical procedures, before the results are presented in relation to the two research questions. Finally, the findings are discussed in relation to previous studies and recommendations made for the future development of education inspection policymaking.

Education inspection: conceptualisation and practices

Education inspection is generally conceptualised as a formative and/or summative evaluation process in which inspectors, either as individuals or in groups, assess the quality and performance of education institutions, programmes, or projects. The inspection results are commonly documented in an inspection report (Wilcox, 2000).

Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015) developed a framework to differentiate high- and low-stakes inspection systems. In high-stakes systems, inspectors exercise hierarchical control over schools and hold school leaders and teachers accountable for their performance (Grek et al., 2013; Kemethofer et al., 2017). Common inspection approaches include conducting cyclical inspections on every school and differentiated inspections on the weak ones, ranking schools from outstanding to failing, imposing interventions on failing schools, and publishing inspection results to increase accountability pressure on schools (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). In low-stakes systems, by contrast, inspection is conducted by providing schools with information, encouraging self-assessment, and co-designing school-based improvement plans as ‘springboards of improvement’ (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015; Kemethofer et al., 2017). Schools in low-stakes systems face less accountability pressure, and therefore, can focus more on self-management and school improvement, rather than fulfilling top-down inspection expectations.

Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015) applied this high- and low-stakes inspection framework to examine the inspection systems of seven European countries. They determined that the English and Dutch systems exhibit high-stakes features, whilst the Austrian and Swiss ones appear to be low-stakes, with Swedish, Irish, and Czech systems occupying the middle ground. Their study suggests that inspection systems are highly context-bounded, their primary goal being to serve education governance by imposing ‘accountability pressure’ on schools to achieve the government’s education quality expectations. One important conclusion from this study is that although school leaders tend to organise more school improvement and capacity building activities as a response to inspections, these are often stimulated by accountability pressure, rather than the school’s own development needs (Altrichter & Kemethofer, 2015). This begs the question of whether high-stakes inspection systems really serve schools’ sustainable development.

A sub-study of this project further explored this by comparing the high-stakes Swedish and low-stakes Austrian inspection systems (Kemethofer et al., 2017). The findings show that in both countries, inspection exerts a small to medium impact on school effectiveness and teaching conditions. Particularly in the high-stakes Swedish system, this positive impact is achieved mainly by promoting a school’s improvement capacity. Swedish schools tend to respond better to the inspection expectations and criteria before the inspectors visit the school. In contrast, in the low-stakes Austrian system, the impact of inspection work appears to be mediated by a school’s self-evaluation. Austrian schools more effectively integrate the inspection feedback provided, and use the inspection criteria to guide their long-term development (Kemethofer et al., 2017). These two mechanisms suggest a school’s response varies according to the incentives and punishments imposed by different inspection systems.

When investigating the inspection systems in England and Scotland, Ozga et al. (2013) conceptualised inspection as a governing practice. Differing from most studies, that focus on

how inspectors monitor school performance and teachers' work, their research looked at how the work of inspectors has been affected by political changes (Ozga et al., 2013). The findings show that in England, inspection has a long tradition spanning over 140 years. In 1992, the Thatcher government established the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) to govern schools at a distance. Simultaneously, greater choice was given to parents and to school autonomy promoted. The English inspection system is largely based on the neoliberal ideals of monitoring a diverse education market and auditing school quality via a non-governmental agency, Ofsted (Beckmann et al., 2009; Courtney, 2013).

Several studies have emphasised that Ofsted bears responsibility for measuring and comparing schools in order to identify institutional failures (Baxter & Clarke, 2013; Ofsted, 2019; Ozga et al., 2013). Based on the inspection results, outstanding schools are exempted from further inspection, whilst schools requiring improvement are subject to tougher inspection and, potentially, penalties for failures (Altrichter and Kemethofer, 2015; Ozga et al., 2013). The paradox here is that on the one hand Ofsted uses a single inspection framework to measure teaching and learning, while on the other hand the UK government advocates for diversifying education provision. Inevitably, inspectors in England are often caught between the conflicting expectations of a system based on top-down control and increasingly autonomous schools (Ozga et al., 2013).

In Scotland, most inspectors are serving teachers and school head teachers who work as liaisons between schools and local authorities. Since 2011, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education has been merged with Learning and Teaching Scotland to create Education Scotland, which conducts development-oriented inspections that features internal peer-coaching instead of external assessment (Ozga et al., 2013). A PRAISE (i.e. Purpose, Relationships, Awareness, Information gathering, Sharing information, and Enabling) framework was established to engage school leaders, teachers, parents, and students in the

inspection process and to allow schools to use inspectors as consultants for collaborative improvement (Principles of Inspection and Review, 2011). Through this comparison, one can conclude that Ofsted functions more like an enforcement agency, while Education Scotland plays the role of a partner agency (Ozga et al., 2013).

Since 2008, a risk-based inspection system has been established in the Netherlands. This model allows inspectors to detect failing schools and intervene at an early stage based on students' achievement data. Other schools with satisfactory results are not burdened with further inspection. Ehren and Shackleton (2016) examined the effectiveness of this model. They found that risk-based inspection can boost failing schools' short-term test results so that they are able to safely pass the next inspection round. Nevertheless, students' satisfaction declined over time in weak and very weak schools because negative inspection results damaged the school's morale and undermined students' achievement in the subjects that were not inspected.

This literature review reveals that the content and format of inspections have been enriched and diversified to include not only the examination of school legal compliance and teacher performance but also school improvement, accountability, and cost effectiveness (Brown et al., 2016). The priorities and purposes of inspections are designed to serve particular types of education governance, which can be centralised or decentralised, and high-stakes or low-stakes. The system of education inspection in China has undergone a similar development process and has its own features and challenges. The next section presents these in detail.

Education inspection in China: a challenging circumstance

To fully comprehend the complexity of the education inspection system in China, it is necessary to examine its history. According to Zhou, Kallo, Rinne, and Suominen (2018), formal education inspection organised by the central government already existed during the

imperial era, dating to the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). The use of top-down inspection to ensure education institutions comply with the central government has a long tradition in China. During the Republican era (1912-1949), the two World Wars disrupted many education activities. Nevertheless, it also brought John Dewey's pragmatism to Chinese schools and, to some extent, democratised the education system. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the communist ideology and China's political relationship with the Soviet Union have formed a teacher-centred centralised education system. The subsequent decade-long Cultural Revolution (1967-1977) overthrew both Chinese traditional (e.g. Confucianism) and western ideologies (e.g. liberalism and pragmatism). Zhou et al. (2018) regard the Cultural Revolution as an ideological purge during which education inspection was abolished as part of the communist political agenda.

After the disruption of the Cultural Revolution, the modern education inspection system went through three developmental stages in China: *the restoration stage (1977-1990s)*, *the formalisation stage (1990s-2007)*, and *the transition stage (2007-present)* (Zhou et al., 2018).

In brief, Chinese inspectors bear a dual-responsibility for inspecting the administration of the local education bureau and the education quality of local schools (Ministry of Education, 1983). Influenced by the global trend of using large-scale assessment to monitor education quality, in 2015, the inspection system incorporated a third function; executing education assessment (Zhou et al., 2018). The expansion and enrichment of inspection work calls for a re-structuring of power relations and a re-distribution of resources within the education system.

In response to these demands, key policies such as the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (Ministry of Education, 2010) and the *Supervision Measures for Responsibility of Primary and Secondary Schools on Education Supervision* (State Council, 2013) were issued. Although these policies are

intended to make inspection office more independent from the education bureau and more professional in terms of supporting local schools, in practice inspectors face ideological and power conflicts.

In their recent paper, Tian and Lan (2020) identified three major challenges faced by inspectors. First, the ambiguous power relations between local education bureaux and inspection offices subvert the validity of inspections. Inspectors find it difficult to challenge the authority and decisions bureaucrats' because the latter in particular tends to affect their career prospects. Second, local governments lack the willingness and resources to replace unqualified inspectors with more professional ones. Third, inspectors who shift career paths between schools and inspection offices find the current system sabotages their career prospects.

One factor contributing to these challenges is the conflict between communist and the neoliberal ideologies (Tian & Lan, 2020). The following section illustrates these conflicts.

Ideological conflicts: communism and neoliberalism

Since 1949, the Communist Party has been the ruling power in China. Being part of the social infrastructure, education inspection is a tool to reinforce the Communist Party's power and to cultivate citizens' loyalty to the Party (Tsang, 2000). Reflected in the inspection policy, the *(Interim) Regulation of Education Inspection* states that all inspectors should uphold socialist values and closely monitor schools' and education bureaux' compliance with the Communist Party's educational policies (Ministry of Education, 1991).

Earlier studies confirm that most inspectors are Communist Party members who receive regular ideological and political education such as *Marxism-Leninism*, *Mao Zedong Thought*, *Deng Xiaoping Theory*, *the Theory of Three Represents*, and *Core Socialist Values*, and apply them in their inspection work (Tian and Lan, 2020; Zhou et al., 2018). Being familiar with

the government's political doctrines and agenda enables inspectors to assess better schools' implementation of the politically-permeated curricula and extracurricular activities.

According to current educational policies and legislation, all forms of educational activities must embed 12 core socialist values including *prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, rule of law, patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship* (Xi, 2018). For instance, all schools provide nationalistic education related to events such as “the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the Great Sichuan Earthquake in 2008, the 2010 Shanghai Expo, as well as Chinese Olympic medallists and the mainland's successful completion of space missions” (Lau et al., 2016, p. 686). To inculcate communist ideology, schools encourage teachers to become Party members and students to join the Young Pioneers and the Communist Youth League. These educational activities have to be well documented and constantly examined by education bureaux and inspection offices to ensure schools' successful delivery of the communist political agenda (Burguete & Lam, 2014; Zhao et al., 2010).

In addition to communism, since the 1980s neoliberalism has started to shape the Chinese education system. Brought by globalisation and China's strong connection to the global economy, neoliberal ideals focus on boosting educational productivity and competitiveness (Tian and Lan, 2020; Tsang, 2000). For example, privatisation encourages the private sector to become a formal and informal education provider and to compete against state-owned public schools. The diversification of the education market is expected to provide better quality education and a wider range of options for parents to choose from (Tolofari, 2005).

Neoliberalism is also reflected in the decentralisation of education administration in China. Policies such as the 1985 *Systemic Reform of Education*, the 1993 *Outline of Educational Reform and Development*, and the 1999 *Action Plan for Educational Development* underline that local education bureaux have the autonomy to devise local education policies and to

allocate resources. As a result, in order to excel in various published or unpublished league tables, resources are often allocated to maximise productivity (Bessant et al., 2015).

Correspondingly, tighter performance specifications, a performance-based merit pay system, and standardised assessments are created to measure the input-output efficiency in the education system (Tolofari, 2005).

Research has shown that Chinese inspectors often find themselves facing competing demands caused by these two parallel ideologies (Tian and Lan, 2020). The communist ideals oblige inspectors to comply with the ruling power and to monitor schools' nationalistic education. Naturally, Communist Party-led local education bureaux exercise leadership over inspectors. Under the communist political structure, inspection offices used to be an integrated element of local education bureaux. However, neoliberal doctrines aim to transform inspectors into service providers in a quasi-market that promotes diversity and competition (Tian and Lan, 2020). By doing so, inspection offices are supposed to exercise autonomous power over education bureaux and schools. Chinese inspectors face tension between power centralisation and decentralisation as well as control and autonomy (Tian and Lan, 2020; Zhao et al., 2010).

The above-mentioned historical background, ongoing changes, and ideological conflicts of the Chinese education inspection system constitute the research context. It is in this eco-system that Chinese inspectors exercise different forms of power and interact with education bureaux and schools. To further unpack the complex power relations of the system, this study employs French and Raven (1959) and Raven's (1965) six bases of social power as an analytical framework.

Analytical framework: six bases of social power

In social science research, one of the most notable frameworks on power is French and Raven (1959) and Raven's (1965) six bases of social power (Podsakoff & Schriesheim, 1985). This

framework is particularly useful for this study as a tool to delineate different sources of power exercised by the inspection offices, education bureaux, and schools in the Chinese setting, and thus makes it possible to detect the power tensions between the three.

Social power, according to French and Raven (1959), is the potential influence possessed by an agent or a group of agents to change others' cognition, attitude, or behaviour in a social setting. The original framework consists of five bases of power which are the reward, coercive, legitimate, expert, and referent power (French & Raven, 1959). In 1965, a sixth distinct power, informational power, was added to the typology.

One key presumption of the framework is that an agent or a group of agents do not possess just one power but a combination of several bases of power. Reward and coercive power are the two sides of the same coin. The former implies the powerful uses (the promise of) incentives to encourage compliance, whilst the latter is about using (the threat of) violence or punishment to discourage certain attitudes and behaviours (French & Raven, 1959). Notably, reward and coercive power do not have to be fully executed. Even the promise or threat of them can exert impact on the recipient. Legitimate power is bound to one's position of authority in a social structure, which gives rise to reward and coercive power (Carson et al., 1993).

Compared to reward, coercive, and legitimate power – all of which are position-based – referent, expert, and informational power are each bound to the individual. With referent power, an individual or a group become so attractive that others want to be associated or identified with them. Through referent power, the powerful can influence the perceptions and behaviours of others (French & Raven, 1959). Expert power refers to an individual's expertise, knowledge, credibility, and skills in a particular field that can be used to affect others. Lastly, Raven (1965) supplemented the framework with informational power. He

argues that possessing information that others want or even being the gatekeeper of such information can give one strong influence in social relationships.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to gain insights into the power bases and power tensions within the Chinese education inspection system. Because this topic has been understudied, the qualitative design allows the researcher to explore participants' real-life experiences and to capture their nuances (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Two data sets were collected for the study.

First, policy documents on the development and reforms of education inspection in China provide first-hand information on the topic. Altogether 13 policy documents (Table 1) published between 1991 and 2018 were collected and analysed. These policies cascade from the national to municipal and district levels, reflecting the ideologies, goals, and values that underpin the education inspection system.

<Insert Table 1 here>

For data analysis, critical policy analysis (CPA) was employed as a fine-grained approach to acquire a deeper understanding of how education policies have been made in a historical and political context (Taylor, 1997). This study paid special attention to the linkages between the three levels of inspection policies to highlight the power relations among inspection office, local education bureaux, and schools. Following Taylor's (1997) recommendation, CPA also features a critical analysis on policy discourses. Thus, the current study not only presents what has been articulated in the policy documents, but also critically examines whether these policies have been translated into practice via expert interviews with inspectors (Apple, 2019; Taylor, 1997).

The second dataset comprised eight expert interviews with inspectors from two districts in Shanghai, China. Expert interview is a time-efficient data collection method. Experts serve as “crystallisation points” who provide insiders’ knowledge that is otherwise difficult for the researcher to access (Bogner et al., 2009, p. 2). Expert sampling refers to the identification of key informants who are particularly knowledgeable about a topic and are willing to share their knowledge (Frey, 2018). In this study, the author first approached one inspector in District A who participated in the author’s previous research project on education inspection. Drawing on this key informant’s professional knowledge, the author learned that inspectors have different professional trajectories and inspection work is designed differently from one district to another. To capture a wide spectrum of viewpoints, the author thus recruited interviewees from different backgrounds, including former teachers, retired school leaders, and former education bureaucrats, to fully represent the diverse composition of real-world inspection teams. This goal was achieved by the key informant’s liaison with inspection offices in two districts. Altogether, five inspectors from District A and three inspectors from District B participated in this study.

In terms of the interview format, eight individual semi-structured interviews were conducted. This approach allowed each expert to independently describe their experience on the topic (Bogner et al., 2009). The interviews were conducted online due to the fact that the researcher and the participants lived in two different countries. Each interview lasted for 30-40 minutes and was audio recorded with each participant’s permission. The interview content was transcribed and coded according to French and Raven (1959) and Raven’s (1965) six bases of social power framework. Similar theory-based latent codes (i.e. six bases of social power), together with the original data-based semantic codes (e.g. interview excerpts), were grouped to form themes and to answer the following interview questions (Attride-Stirling, 2016; Braun & Clarke, 2013). *What are the underpinning ideologies and values of the ongoing*

education inspection reform in China? How are inspectors recruited in your district? What kinds of power are exercised by the inspection office, educational bureau, and schools? What challenges and opportunities are faced by Chinese inspectors? Notably, the answers to the first interview question have been analysed and reported in a separate research paper (Tian and Lan, 2020) and the key information synthesised in the *Education inspection in China: a challenging circumstance* section above. The answers to the remaining three interview questions are presented in the *Findings* section below.

To enhance the reliability of the study, the author took the following measures to ensure research credibility (i.e. internal validity) and transferability (i.e. external validity).

Credibility refers to the rigour of the research process (Morrow, 2005). In this study, credibility was achieved by the providing descriptions of the interviewees' experiences of inspection practices, as well as the context in which education bureaux, inspection offices, and schools interact with each other. Transferability, on the other hand, refers to the extent to which readers can apply the findings to their own context (Morrow, 2005). This was accomplished by providing detailed socio-cultural context of ongoing Chinese education inspection reforms and comparing the findings with studies that explored similar phenomenon in other contexts.

Findings

This section reports the findings emerged from the CPA and expert interview thematic analysis. The first part presents different forms of power exercised by inspection offices, education bureaux, and schools. The second part illustrates the power tensions within the inspection system discerned by the interviewed inspectors.

Power bases

After examining the policy documents against the taxonomy of power bases (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1965), the power bases exercised by the inspection offices, the education bureaux, and schools were summarised, as shown in Table 2.

<Insert Table 2 here>

The Ministry of Education (2010) issued the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* which separated education management (i.e. education bureaux), operation (i.e. schools), and evaluation (i.e. inspection offices). To achieve this goal, corresponding education inspection policies were established, including the national level *Regulations on Educational Supervision* (State Council, 2012) and the municipal level *Explanation of Shanghai Education Inspection Regulation* (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2016). According to these legislations, inspectors have the power to monitor education bureau's administration and school performance. During the inspection, inspectors exercise their legitimate power to check documents, attend meetings, and organise interviews at the inspected institution. In the inspection reports, inspectors acknowledge good performance (reward power) as well as demand poor-performing institutions to draw up action plans for improvement (coercive power). Most inspectors have a background as a teacher or a school leader, which bestows expert power on them to examine both teachers' pedagogic work and school leadership work. The inspection work also equips inspectors with informational power about various types of education providers in the district. The ongoing reform aims to give inspection office more autonomy that will reinforce their referent power as an independent evaluation agency. Nevertheless, this goal has not been achieved due to the power tensions that is illustrated in the next section.

Education bureaux, as the second key agent in the inspection system, exercise referent power by connecting education offices and local schools with national and local level governments.

According to the *Decision about the Establishment of the Steering Committee for Education Inspection* (General Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2012), education bureaux have the legitimate power to implement national and local educational policies and supervise schools and other education providers. Along with the administration decentralisation outlined in the *National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)*, education bureaux gain more reward power to allocate resources locally (Ministry of Education, 2010). Correspondingly, a bureau can also exercise coercive power to dismiss school personnel and inspectors for poor performance or misconduct. The central government bestows informational power on education bureaux to interpret educational policies. Using their expert power, education bureaucrats also design local educational policies.

Lastly, schools are the third component constituting the education inspection triangle. According to education legislation, schools have legitimate power to organise teaching and learning as well as the autonomy to organise school-based management. Within the school, head teachers have certain reward power to incentivise teachers and staff. As education providers, schools are obliged to receive regular examinations from the education bureau and inspection office. Besides being the recipient of the legitimate power, schools also exercise power over the inspection office. According to the *Shanghai (Interim) Regulation of Recruiting Education Inspectors* (Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, 2018), schools have the coercive power to report an inspector's misconduct, such as disrupting the school's daily operation or fabricating information in the inspection report. In the current system, most inspectors come from schools. Schools, therefore, become the most important place for inspectors' initial preparation (referent power). Through inspections, schools demonstrate their expert power of educating students and developing teachers. Lastly, schools possess valuable information about teachers, students, and parents (informational power) that the

inspection office and education bureau need in order to design educational policies and assessments.

According to the CPA results, it appears that the ongoing inspection reform aims to clarify the power bases and boundaries among inspection offices, education bureaux, and schools. These policies aim to construct a stable and balanced inspection triangle in which each party is held accountable by the other two. However, after a decade long policy implementation, the interviewed inspectors experienced various forms of power tensions generated by this system. The thematic analysis of the interviews reveals these tensions.

Power tensions

The first tension discerned by the inspectors centres on the education bureau's informational power versus the inspection office's legitimate power. According to the interviewees, although inspection offices are juridically independent from the education bureaux, administratively, the former is still regarded as a sub-unit of the latter. Their blurred roles are caused by the dominant informational power possessed by the Director of the Education Bureau in the inspection committee.

Most inspection committee members, such as the Directors of the Finance Bureau and Development Bureau, do not have the knowledge of inspection legislations and practice. So, the committee heavily relies on the Director of the Education to interpret education policies and appoint inspectors.

(Inspector 1 from District A)

This leads to a peculiar situation in which the education bureau and the inspection office not only share the same director but also follow the same policy interpretation. Another interviewee described it as the education bureau being “both the athlete and the referee”. One

used a “father and son” analogy to depict the relationship between the education bureau and the inspection office.

Because both the education bureau and inspection office are led by the same director, our relationship is like father and son. Different from what the national policy says, in our district, the education bureau selects experienced school leaders and teachers to become inspectors. We do not have an open recruitment for inspectors. The education bureau can also influence the inspection committee to investigate inspectors. The inspection reform has not balanced the power distribution between the inspection office and the education bureau. (Inspector 2 from District A)

This viewpoint is echoed by other interviewees, who regard the practice of separating education management (education bureau) from education evaluation (inspection office) “far-fetched” and “futile”. To ease this tension, one interviewed inspector from District B shared their experience of recruiting inspectors from universities and other professional institutions.

Our district recruited a few inspectors with education evaluation background from universities and consultancy companies. This can minimise the chance of inspectors succumbing to the power of the education bureau. However, this is not a common practice in other districts. (Inspector 3 from District B)

The second power tension is inspectors’ expert power versus referent power. All the eight interviewees expressed their concerns regarding inspectors’ professional status and future career prospects. They point out that the Chinese education system has rigid career progression systems to motivate teachers and education bureaucrats, leaving education inspection a void for career advancement. Becoming an inspector often means “a dead-end to

one's career" which undermines inspectors' referent power in front school practitioners and bureaucrats. One inspector who was rehired after his retirement shared his personal experience.

I became an inspector in 2007 and retired in 2018. During this time, I did not advance my teacher's professional title. Because of that, I only get a very basic pension. In our district, we are allowed to recruit inspectors outside the education system, but few people found the job attractive. Many teachers, school leaders, and administrators see inspector as a technical position with few career opportunities. (Inspector 4 from District B)

The interviewees found that the lack of career prospects and long-term financial incentives tended to undermine their referent power because experts with expert power would not want to take on this position.

For a long time, the inspection office was deemed an escape for poor-performing school leaders or the ones who had committed professional misconducts. So far, not all the unqualified inspectors have reached their retirement age. Real experts in educational assessment would work in other research institutions or education bureau. We do not have inspectors with educational assessment background in the team. Most of the time, inspectors just learn on the job. (Inspector 2 from District A)

The ongoing inspection reform endeavours to raise inspector's professional status and encourages them to exercise more expert power over schools and education bureaux. To achieve this, several interviewees emphasised the importance of building a career advancement system for inspectors, to legitimise their expert power.

“The inspector attrition is already very high in our district because people do not see the prospect of this job.” (Inspector 7 from District A)

“Having a professional title would send the signal to schools and education bureaux that we have the expertise.” (Inspector 8 from District A)

“Without a career advancement system and a corresponding salary system, it is very hard to attract young competent people to join the inspection team.” (Inspector 4 from District B)

According to the interviewees, the main challenge was to retain and motivate inspectors in the system. The proposed solution was to increase inspectors’ referent power by recognising their expert power via a structured professional title system.

The last power tension relates to the school’s expert power being diminished by inspection offices and education bureau’s legitimate power. The interviewees point out that rigid inspection and box ticking exercises result in a school’s lack of autonomy. The school pedagogic and management work are constantly monitored by both education bureaux and inspection offices. The results of these examinations and inspections determine school leaders’ and teachers’ professional titles. One inspector described the overwhelming number of examinations and inspections schools receive.

This is the question that puzzles everyone. How much autonomy should we give to schools? All the polices say that schools should organise teaching and learning autonomously. But how can we know it without constantly measuring their performance? The reality is that the education bureau wants to gain more data about schools and, therefore, designed various drop-in visits and examinations. Our [inspectors’] responsibility is to monitor

whether the education bureau has done their monitoring on schools in addition to conducting our own inspections. (Inspector 4 from District A)

Legislation holds inspection offices and education bureaux accountable for monitoring school performance. The add-on education assessment responsibility further increases the inspection office's legitimate power over schools. As a result, school leaders and teachers are forced to organise all school activities so that they can safely pass these examinations. Several inspectors find this box-ticking exercise to only serve the bureaucratic expediency rather than school development.

Inspection offices and education bureaux should help schools to solve problems that are beyond schools' capacity. The rest of it should be left to the school leaders and teachers to organise. But this is not the case here. (Inspector 7 from District A)

We [Inspectors] use the same set of criteria to measure schools. This leads to a thousand schools sharing one profile. (Inspector 6 from District B)

Schools are so burdened with top-down examinations. How can head teachers and teachers have the time to think about their school improvement? (Inspector 8 from District A)

Furthermore, the inspection results are published online for parents and society to monitor schools' performance. These practices create a quality surveillance system rather than a school improvement system.

School leaders, teachers, and inspectors are battling with endless paperwork, lesson observations, and meetings. Inspection results have not been fully used to serve school development. (Inspector 4 from District A)

Regarding this power tension, several inspectors agree that the ongoing inspection reforms are moving in the right direction, but that more effort should be made by every key stakeholder. Looking to the future, they suggest the following changes.

The education bureaux should play their role as the resource provider and give inspection office and schools more trust. (Inspector 1 from District A)

Instead of adding more summative assessment to the inspection content, we can use more formative assessment to help schools' long-term development. So, we need more training and resources to do this. (Inspector 3 from District B)

Discussion

From the imperial era to the communist regime, education inspection has served the ruling powers in China to monitor the successful implementation of their political agenda in a centralised education system (Tsang, 2000; Zhou et al., 2018). Along with China's growing importance in the global economy, building a competitive education system to prepare workers for the national and global labour markets has become a key national development strategy. Education inspection is, therefore, expected to serve this educational goal by playing its role in quality assurance (Ministry of Education, 2010).

This study reveals that the process of making inspection offices a professional and independent agency in China has encountered many challenges. Some dilemmas faced by Chinese inspectors mirror what their counterparts in other countries have experienced. For instance, Sun, Creemers, and de Jong (2007) studied effective school improvement in eight European countries. In countries such as England and Sweden, they identified a trend of decentralising budget and personnel management to schools and centralising inspection and accountability to bring interventions to failing schools (Croxford, 2010; Gustafsson et al.,

2014). Similar trends are reported by Chinese inspectors. The Chinese inspection system has to date been focused mainly on summative assessment and box-ticking exercises rather than school development. This makes China an example of what Altrichter and Kemethofer (2015) called a high-stakes inspection system which uses accountability pressure to standardise school practices. Because education bureaux on both national and local levels communicate education expectations to schools via inspections, it tends to undermine the status of inspection offices as independent professional agencies. Chinese schools appear to strategically produce outcomes that satisfy the inspection criteria but pay little attention to inspection feedback, just as Gustafsson, Lander, and Myrberg (2014) and Kemethofer et al. (2017) have found in the Swedish system.

In his earlier work, MacBeath (2006, p. 37) described the power tension in the inspection system in England.

“Isn’t it ultimately about unequal power, the lack of reciprocity in the relationship, the politicised, somewhat inspectorial role of the school improvement partner?”

Examining the findings against Ozga et al.’s (2013) enforcement versus partner agency dichotomy, this study has found that the Chinese inspection system has similar features to Ofsted in England. The primary purpose of inspection offices is to monitor schools’ and education bureau’s compliance to the ruling power and the implementation of prescribed education policies. So far, inspectors have not been fully transformed from a superfluous administrator-like role to a fully accredited profession.

Through the lenses of French and Raven (1959) and Raven’s (1965) six bases of social power, this study has discovered the unbalanced power distribution among the education bureaux, inspection offices, and schools. Education bureaux exercise strong informational,

referent, and legitimate power that represses the expert power of inspection offices and schools. Inspection has always been a powerful policy lever to guide schools towards desired outcomes (MacBeath, 2006). Even if Chinese schools are given the opportunity to conduct self-assessment, it is still the inspection reports, standardised test results, and all sorts of top-down examinations that determine a school's effectiveness and school leaders' and teachers' merits. The education bureaux and inspection office "reserve their judgement on the capacity of the school to make improvement" (MacBeath, 2006, p. 5). They do not only possess this legitimate power but also the coercive and reward power to punish and incentivise schools. These all reflect the neoliberal ideals of using accountability pressure to achieve quality assurance.

Most Chinese inspectors noted the lack of referent and expert power at work and expressed the need of a professional title system. Instead, the Chinese government decided to bestow more coercive power to the inspection offices so that they can design and use more standardised tests to assess schools and more interventions if schools fail inspection. This practice echoes the Dutch risk-based inspection system discussed in the literature review section. As earlier studies show, the coercive power exercised by inspection offices can markedly narrow the curriculum and change the ethos of schools. Using standardised test results as risk indicators rejects other contextual factors that may contribute to a school's poor performance (Ehren & Shackleton, 2016). In the long run, if policymakers and education bureaucrats fail to address these issues, education inspection may worsen systemic inequality in China.

According to Böttger-Beer and Koch (2008), education development can be driven by competition, external intervention, or insight. In the Chinese system, inspection reports are published for schools to demonstrate their competitiveness and to inform parents and students. External interventions are imposed on poor-performing schools to stimulate their

quality improvement. By contrast, insight-driven school improvement is less frequently observed in the Chinese education system. Looking to the future, Chinese inspectors could learn from their Scottish counterparts to work more collaboratively with school experts and to use inspection criteria and school self-assessment to serve school development (Ozga et al., 2013). To do so, education bureaux should first recognise the expert power possessed by the inspection offices and schools, and relinquish their own coercive power.

Conclusion

From the perspectives of power bases and power tensions, this study critically analyses the Chinese education inspection policies and practices. There are a few notable limitations. Findings derived from eight expert interviews from Shanghai may not fully capture all the nuances in inspection practices in China. Bureaucratic barriers mean only two district level education policies were obtained for the CPA. Hence, it is difficult to make policy comparisons across different districts to illustrate the inspection practices on the micro level. In spite of this, the findings reveal that China has a high-stakes accountability-based system in which power distribution is unbalanced and tensions are ubiquitous. Influenced by neoliberal ideologies, Chinese education inspection is a high-stakes system featuring high accountability pressure, external intervention, and competition-driven school development. At the same time, under the communist regime, inspectors' and schools' professional autonomy and expert power succumbed to the education bureaux.

This study has both research and practice implications. So far, very few studies have investigated education inspection in China. Even fewer publications can be found in English scientific journals. This critical analysis adds insights to the existing knowledge base. By the end of the 2010-2020 national medium and long-term education reform and development, this study brought Chinese inspectors' voices to researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

The interviewed inspectors expressed their wish to establish a professional progression system for inspector to strengthen their expert power. Like many other countries with a high-stakes inspection system, China also faces the challenge of sacrificing school autonomy and long-term development for short-term inspection results. In addition to using external intervention and competition, school members' and inspectors' professional insights should be better utilised to serve school development.

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Tables

Table 1. Thirteen reviewed education legislations and policies in China

Promulgator	English title	Original title	Level
Ministry of Education (1991)	(Interim) Regulation of Education Inspection	教育督导暂行规定	National
Ministry of Education (2007)	Decision about the Establishment of the Steering Committee for the Basic Education Quality Assessment of the Ministry of Education	教育部办公厅关于成立教育部基础教育质量监测指导委员会的通知	National
Ministry of Education (2010)	National Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)	国家中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要（2010-2020）	National
Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (2010)	Shanghai Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)	上海市中长期教育改革和发展规划纲要（2010-2020）	Municipal
General Office of the State Council (2012)	Decision about the Establishment of the Steering Committee for Education Inspection	国务院办公厅关于成立国务院教育督导委员会的通知	National
State Council (2012)	Regulations on Educational Supervision	教育督导条例	National
Ministry of Education	Zone of Inspector's Responsibility	督学责任区建设的意见	National
Standing Committee of the National People's	Education Law of the People's Republic of China (Revised in 2015)	中华人民共和国教育法（2015 年修订）	National

Congress (2015) Shanghai Municipal Education Commission	Measures of Listing Shanghai Primary and Secondary School Inspectors	上海市中小学校责任督学挂牌督导工作管理办 法	Municipal
(2015) Shanghai Municipal Education Commission	Explanation of Shanghai Education Inspection Regulation	上海市教育督导条例释义	Municipal
(2016) District A Government	Decision on the Establishment of the Education Inspection Committee in District A	A 区人民政府关于成立 A 区教育督导委员会的 通知	District
(2017) District A Office for Public Sector Reform	Official Reply on the Restructuring of the District Inspection Office	关于调整区政府教育督导室机构设置的批复	District
(2018) Shanghai Municipal Education Commission	Shanghai (Interim) Regulation of Recruiting Education Inspectors (Revised in 2018)	上海市督学聘任实施办法（暂行）（2018 年 修订）	Municipal
(2018)			

Table 2. Six bases of power exercised by the inspection offices, education bureaux, and schools

Bases of power	Inspection Offices	Education Bureaux	Schools
Reward	Recognising education bureau's and schools' good performance in the inspection report	Allocating resources to local schools and inspection office	Rewarding teachers for good performance
Coercive	Identifying education bureau's and schools' misconducts and implementing interventions	Dismissing school personnel and unqualified inspectors for misconducts	Reporting inspector's misconducts;
Legitimate	Inspecting education administration of the education bureau and the quality of schools	Implementing educational policies; Supervising schools	Leading teaching and learning and extra-curricular activities
Referent	Connecting education bureau and schools.	Connecting higher level education administration and schools	Preparing inspectors for the inspection office
Expert	Possessing hands-on experience of teaching and leadership work	Designing and implementing local education policies	Leading pedagogy and school-based management
Informational	Knowing the inspected education bureau and schools	Interpreting national level education policies	Knowing students' development needs and parents' expectations