Marxist Philosophy and Education: Exploring the Role of Critical Pedagogy in Empowering the Marginalised

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Abstract

Mitigating social inequality is essential for sustainable human development. This study, drawing on data from the *World Inequality Report*, UNICEF, the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and Chinese policy documents such as the Plan for Education Modernisation by 2035, explores the role of critical pedagogy in addressing disparities affecting marginalised groups in China. Despite China's high literacy rate, challenges persist due to factors such as disabilities, abandoned children, migrants, and special needs. The study advocates shifting from rote learning to critical pedagogy, promoting critical thinking, social responsibility, and equitable education. Policy analysis reveals conducive conditions for integrating critical pedagogy to improve opportunities for marginalised groups, benefiting all students while adapting to regional needs. China's approach reflects its unique socio-cultural and historical context, influenced by Marxist theory. These findings inform both pedagogical practice and the development of educational frameworks, advancing equity and inclusion in China's educational system.

Introduction

Social heterogeneity stands as one of the primary characteristics and challenges of society. While financial criteria are not singular, they often serve as the predominant factor leading to social inequality and the relegation of individuals and groups to marginalised cohorts. Data from the *World Inequality Report* (UNDP 2022) vividly illustrate income disparities across various criteria, including global economic inequality, variations in prosperity levels among countries and regions, and gender inequality in income distribution.

In the absence of a universally recognised definition of marginalisation, the most common elucidation is proposed in the *EFA Global Monitoring Report* (UNESCO 2010), wherein this concept is delineated as rooted in social inequality, constituting acute or enduring states of disadvantage experienced by individuals or groups. Within the context of pedagogical research, marginalised students are those who, due to various social factors (such as low income, perceived ethnic background, language barriers, and limited opportunities), have been deprived of access to education or have had that access curtailed.

The UNICEF report demonstrates that in 2020, the number of children who could be classified as belonging to marginalised groups solely due to issues of migration or parental abandonment exceeded 297 million individuals (UNICEF 2020).

Among the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2024, the provision of quality education and the reduction of inequality (including gender inequality) stand out as essential components for achieving the majority of the remaining goals (poverty eradication, decent work, innovation development, urban and population sustainability). However, statistical data concerning access to education worldwide indicate that despite a global trend of increasing literacy rates, regional disparities persist significantly. This pertains to various aspects, not only limited to access to education but also to its quality. For instance, despite India's leading position in the number of universities, its academic ranking remains relatively low. In contrast, in the United States, where the overall number of universities is significantly lower, more than half of them excel in academic rankings (Statista 2023b).

Moreover, when discussing marginalised groups from an educational perspective, it is imperative to acknowledge that this issue extends to adult populations as well. However, it predominantly garners political attention during periods of economic crises when there arises a demand for a more qualified workforce (Roumell, Salajan, and Todoran 2020). Regional disparities also play a significant role in this context. For instance, an assessment of adult illiteracy rates in 2022 revealed that countries in Africa south of the Sahara held the highest position in this ranking (32.28%), whereas the situation was most favourable in North American countries (1.36%) (Statista 2024b).

When discussing issues in the field of education, it is pertinent to note that mere dissemination of knowledge divorced from reality yields relatively low efficacy in solving practical challenges. Consequently, there is a growing interest among researchers in the ideas of critical pedagogy, pioneered by Brazilian educator and pedagogue Paulo Freire. In his works, Freire articulated ideas concerning the connection between the potential for social change and the level of education among the adult population. Significantly, the critical Marxist tradition occupied a prominent place as the philosophical foundation of Freire's teachings. Thus, the application of Marxist theory in pedagogy and education remains relevant for addressing contemporary society's challenges (Gan and Bai 2023).

The reformulation of the education system, creating a situation in which acquired knowledge, ideas, and approaches to their application not only facilitate an understanding of the surrounding world but also actively contribute to positive social change therein, forms the basis of the Marxist approach to education. This finds practical expression in the activities of contemporary proponents of critical pedagogy (Ford 2022).

The education reform initiated in China in 2019, aimed at fostering students' creativity, has yet to fully achieve its objectives (Li 2022). One of the challenges facing modern Chinese education is the necessity for modernising educational approaches to align with the requirements of the contemporary world in the context of globalisation. This extends to the promotion of Marxist ideas in the realms of ideological and political education in a manner that, while preserving fundamental concepts, meets the needs of modern society (Li and Li 2017). Consequently, this study focuses on the regional aspects of employing Marxist and critical education ideas in addressing marginalised groups in China.

Literature Review

In the 21st century, Marxism is a multidimensional phenomenon, the interpretation of which is largely determined by the historical context and political goals of the person promoting the relevant ideas. Thus, "Marxism with Chinese specificity" serves primarily as a tool to justify the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) decisions. In this regard, Wang and Peters (2023) describe Chinese Marxism as a hybrid construct, which is a combination of classical Marxism, its adaptations to Chinese history and culture, and the development of scientific approaches oriented towards modernising Marxism in accordance with social, economic, technological, and other contemporary problems. At the same time, Western theories of Marxism, particularly those based on the Frankfurt School, offer an interpretation of Marxism based on the theory of ideological domination (Burghardt 2020). There is also a desire to return to the classical ideas of Marxism and to develop them outside the influence of state policy (Ford 2024). Thus, the various approaches to understanding Marxism are also reflected in the respective pedagogical conceptions, with the more ideologically constrained Chinese model being contrasted with the more flexible Western approach (Zhuoyuan 2024).

The progressive evolution of Paulo Freire's ideas has enabled researchers to identify additional aspects of this pedagogical orientation. For instance, Gottesman (2016) underscores the need to integrate education with real-world contexts. Alexander (2018) observes that the further development of critical pedagogy, while not deviating from the foundations of classical Marxism, involves constantly broadening the scope of problems to which relevant approaches can be applied. These approaches primarily aim to foster an understanding of the root causes of social and other inequalities and to explore potential avenues for social rejuvenation by overcoming the factors that contribute to the dominance of some individuals over others. Thus, this researcher points out that by directing students' attention towards assessing real-life conditions, critical pedagogy aims at developing their ability to evaluate social relations and strive for social justice critically.

Peters, Neilson, and Jackson (2022) also highlight the particular influences of Marxist ideas on educational theory, which, in connection with the tenets of critical pedagogy, manifest in nurturing individuals' understanding of responsibility not only for their own lives but also for the direction of societal development. Ferreira Jr. and Bittar (2008) note that the fundamental characteristics of the Marxist conception of education are elements such as holistic personal development and grounding in humanistic ideals, fostering balanced physical and spiritual growth.

Mahmoudi, Khoshnood, and Babaei (2014) investigate the fundamental tenets of critical pedagogy from methodological perspectives, particularly focusing on employing its foundational principles in curriculum development. They emphasise the necessity of considering specific social conditions, understanding students' practical needs, attending to local cultural specificities, and accounting for local production and economic conditions.

Meanwhile, Valls-Carol et al. (2022) draw attention to the importance of practically applying critical pedagogy methods to real transformational processes and highlight the impermissibility of mere theorising. The authors identify key transformational directions such as global social reforms, changing approaches towards socially vulnerable groups, enhancing the quality of life for marginalised groups through improving their social adaptation, and changing the role and improving the quality of the education system itself.

In this regard, Clark (2018), examining critical pedagogy practices in university education, raises questions about the effectiveness of lectures and the extent to which this teaching method aligns with trends in building educational processes with maximum orientation towards student needs. Clark concludes that critical pedagogy can be examined from different perspectives: from the methodological standpoint and from the standpoint of content. Discussing the position of teachers in critical pedagogy, McLaren (2020) criticises the detachment of the pedagogical process from the surrounding reality and emphasises their importance in shaping the community as a

whole, assessing the breadth of such influence from the classroom to federal-level institutions.

Studies exploring the development of critical pedagogy ideas across different countries are of significant interest. For instance, Foley et al. (2015), examining the relevant experience in the United States, note that these ideas continue to exist theoretically and are also implemented in practice. Acknowledging that the ideas of critical pedagogy and Marxism do not constitute a globally recognised system in the field of education, researchers discuss their active utilisation directly in the teaching process, primarily driven by the corresponding demand from the student community.

Examining the application of critical pedagogy in contemporary schools in Greece, Vavitsas (2022) draws attention to the low level of awareness among teachers regarding the possibilities of critical pedagogy. However, there is evidence of their understanding of the teacher's role not only as a knowledge bearer in a specific field but also as an educator nurturing students' understanding of life values and realities, indicating their readiness to embrace critical pedagogy ideas.

Olivera and Martínez (2023) highlight the active development of critical pedagogy ideas and methods in Colombia aimed at energising transformational processes in students' development, pedagogy, and society as a whole. Departing from the practice of simple knowledge transmission, teachers actively employ methods aimed at fostering critical thinking among students, increasing their awareness of social realities, and drawing attention to the existence and causes of social problems.

Discussing the prospects for the development of critical pedagogy on a global scale, it is noteworthy to mention the research by Lunevich (2022), which suggests that, given the possibilities offered by modern technologies, one can contemplate the expansion of the application of classical critical pedagogy in the virtual learning environment to "digital critical pedagogy", thereby transcending the confines of the local social environment and broadening approaches to student socialisation.

When discussing theoretical approaches to identifying marginalised groups, Manning (2022) draws attention to the possibility of changing such positions depending on the changing relations of various groups to the means of production, which can affect the condition of social groups. Academic literature also emphasises that, whether referring to marginalised individuals or groups or to contemporary students as a whole, modern pedagogy must consider the freedom that makes a group of students a group of entirely different individuals. For instance, Horsthemke (2021) discusses the inefficiency of any universal approach precisely because of such an amalgamation of students with varying needs, competencies, and learning difficulties in a single classroom. Thus, the goal of the educator is not only to identify such differences but to identify differences that have pedagogical significance.

Liasidou (2012), examining the application of critical pedagogy in the context of inclusive education, highlights the impermissibility of marginalising students due to any characteristics (including disabilities and psychological traits) and considers critical pedagogy as one that enables regenerative processes, moves away from the conventional notion of the "ideal student", and ensures equality of educational opportunities.

Thus, the academic literature covers virtually all aspects of the development of critical pedagogy. In this context, the present study aims to investigate the extent to which these aspects correspond to Chinese realities and whether it is possible to speak of a distinct Chinese path of development for critical pedagogy.

Problem Statement

The development of Chinese society follows its unique path. Guided by Marxist ideals and the tenets of ancient Chinese culture, the Chinese government strives to realise the concept of the common good. Education serves as the foundation for the prosperity of both the individual and society as a whole. Marxist and pedagogical ideas are refracted in accordance with national needs, history, and the ancient culture of the Chinese people. At the same time, processes of globalisation, current economic difficulties, and disparities in regional development led to the emergence of marginalised population groups, including those in the educational sphere. Therefore, it is pertinent to examine the influence of Marxist ideas and critical pedagogy on educational processes related to the organisation of marginalised population groups within the Chinese context.

This study aims, based on a comprehensive approach, to examine the characteristics, opportunities, and prospects of using critical pedagogy ideas and Marxist theory foundations in China when working with a specific target group—marginalised individuals. To achieve this goal, the following tasks were defined: to investigate existing problems leading to the emergence of marginalised groups in the field of education; to analyse official programme documents to identify tasks aimed at addressing problems related to improving the situation of marginalised groups from an educational perspective; to determine the presence or absence of Chinese specificity in organising the educational process using critical pedagogy approaches.

Methods and Materials

The research theme entailed a systematic examination of several spheres capable of influencing critical pedagogy in expanding the rights and opportunities of marginalised individuals.

The aim of the first stage was to assess the relevance of the problem of social inequality as a primary precondition for the emergence of marginal groups in China. The informational basis for this stage of the research included the *World Inequality Report* (UNDP 2022) for studying the income gap among different population categories; data

from the Statista website for assessing the overall access to education worldwide (Statista 2023b), evaluating the literacy rate among adult populations in different regions of the world (Statista 2024b), estimating the literacy rate in different regions of China (Statista 2024a), and analysing the dynamics of literacy growth in the Chinese population (Statista 2023a); the UNICEF report for 2020 on the situation of children in China for determining the number of children belonging to the main marginalised groups (UNICEF 2020); UN information on Sustainable Development Goals for justifying the relevance of specific research issues (poverty alleviation, quality education improvement, gender equality provision, inequality reduction) (United Nations [UN] 2024), and data from the National Bureau of Statistics of China for assessing the opportunities for adult secondary education (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2023).

The second stage of the research involved the examination of two key policy documents. The "Plan for Education Modernisation in China by 2035" (China Government Website 2019) was utilised to assess the inclusion of provisions regarding the incorporation of Marxist and critical pedagogical ideas into the educational process, as well as the prospective goals concerning the improvement of the status of marginalised groups. The "Report on the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, 2022" was employed to evaluate the contemporary trend of Sinicisation of Marxism and the defining directives of the Communist Party of China (CPC) regarding the sphere of education, and overcoming social inequality issues.

The third stage of the research included a questionnaire survey of students belonging to marginalised groups (children from migrant families, children whose parents abandoned them, and children with special needs). The purpose of the questionnaire was to determine the interviewees' perceptions of the instruments aimed at overcoming obstacles in education caused by their status. A total of 150 anonymous questionnaires were randomly selected for analysis. Since the study aimed at obtaining an average, an equal number of questionnaires were selected from respondents from urban and rural areas. The questionnaire included two blocks of questions. The first block centred on questions defining equality of access to education and the availability of support. The second block included questions related to the possibility of personal participation of students belonging to marginalised groups in the educational process. The questionnaires were processed using a simple statistical processing method.

Methodological constraints involved conducting the research exclusively based on publicly available data and focusing on limited marginalised groups.

Results

The Assessment of Social Status in Chinese Society and Marginalised Groups in Education

The disparity in income levels is a leading cause of social inequality and marginalisation of certain population groups. The data presented in the *World Inequality Report* (UNDP 2022) for China indicate an average national income of 88,870 Chinese yuan (approximately 17,600 euros). The discrepancy between the incomes of the most affluent segments of the population (approximately 10%) and the least affluent (approximately 50%) is illustrated in Figure 1. When comparing these income differentials with those of other countries, they exceed European benchmarks but are lower than those of the United States or India. Additionally, when comparing gender-specific regional indicators, Chinese women earn, on average, 12% more than women in other Asian regions.
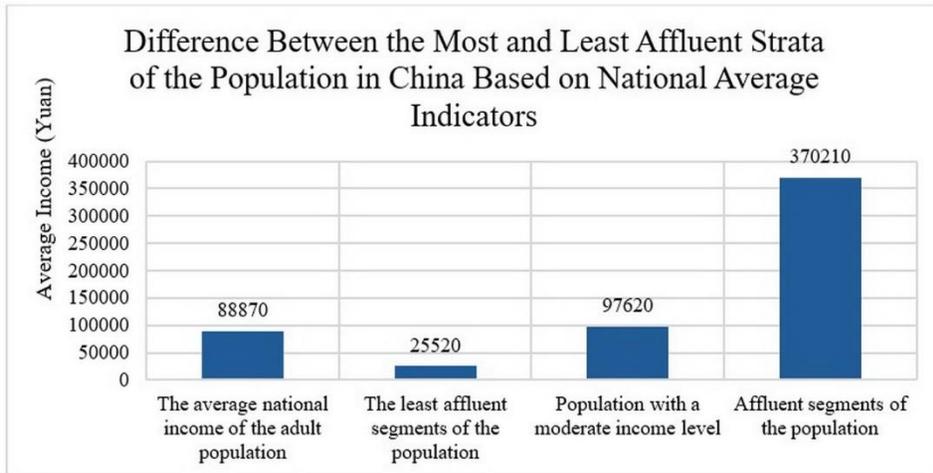
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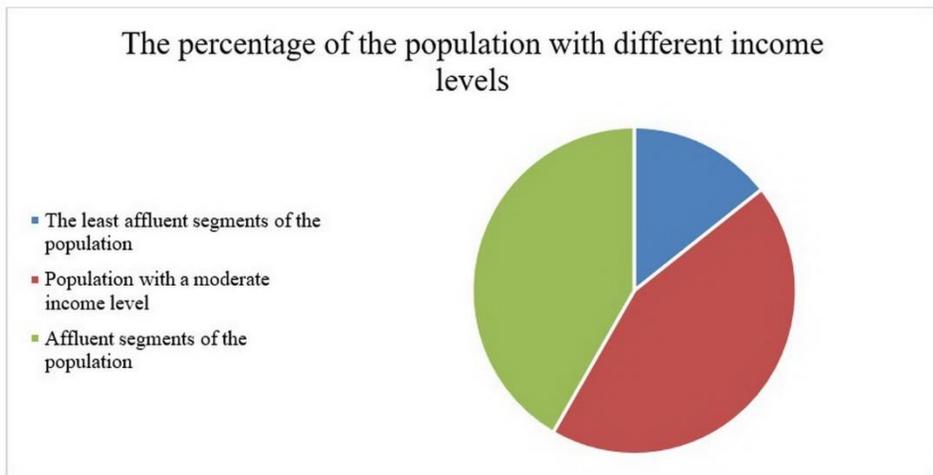
(b)

Figure 1: Disparity between the most and least affluent population strata in China based on national average figures in yuan (according to the UNDP [2022])

The second factor contributing to marginalisation is the lack of education. In terms of overall literacy among the adult population, countries in East Asia rank third (after North America, Europe, and Central Asia), with a rate of 3.96% across regions worldwide. This represents a relatively low level of illiteracy (Statista 2024b). However, the literacy rate varies significantly across different regions of China, ranging from 0.84% in Beijing to 34.55% in the Tibetan region (Statista 2024a). To address adult illiteracy, 354 adult education schools operate within the education system (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2023) (Figure 2).
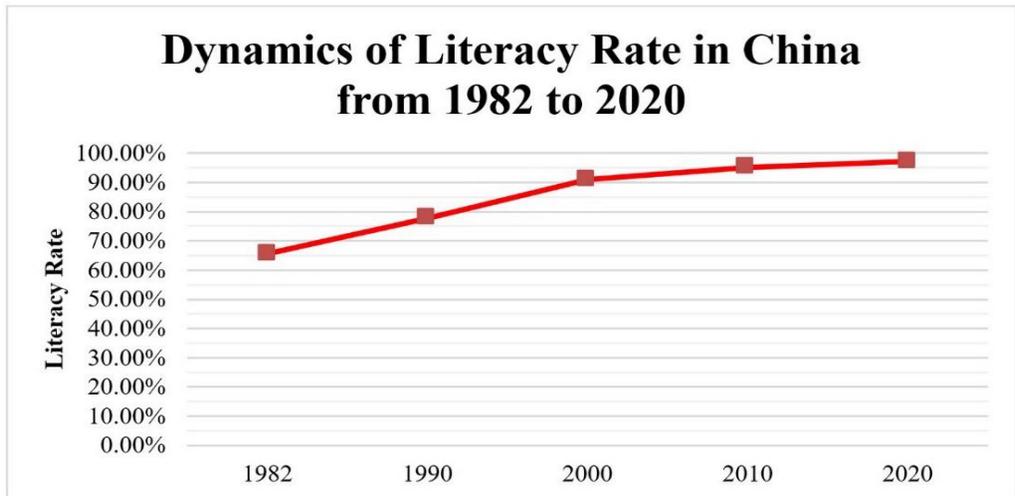
Figure 2: Dynamics of literacy level in China from 1982 to 2020 (based on data from Statista [2023a])

Characterising these data, it is worth noting that the population aged 15 and older is considered in this case. Thus, if we are to discuss the impact of critical education on the quality of life of these groups, such a sample cannot be considered representative. However, evaluating China as a country with a high literacy rate among its population and considering the fact that China is one of the countries with one of the highest rates of mandatory enrolment of children in primary school, it can be concluded that there is a fundamentally high potential for utilising critical education to foster corresponding skills, including the development of critical thinking.

At the same time, the fundamental obligation of education does not guarantee that children and adolescents will be influenced by the education system. Turning to the activities of specialised organisations involved in child rights protection allows for the identification of several marginalised groups. According to data from the organisation World Vision (officially registered in China as World Vision China Foundation Limited), these groups include children left by parents, children with special needs, migrant children, and children affected by natural disasters (World Vision 2024). Data from the UNICEF Report for the year 2020 on the situation of children in China (UNICEF 2020) show that the number of children left by parents (i.e., children whose parents migrated in search of work or cannot care for them) amounted to 41.77 million in rural areas and 25.16 million in urban areas; the number of children with special needs is about 5 million; the number of migrant children is 71.09 million. Thus, despite the high level of access to education in China, there are other structural problems that lead to the marginalisation of children and require attention from the government.

National Planning and Addressing the Educational Needs of Marginalised Groups

Addressing the issues of national education in relation to the development of Marxist and critical pedagogy ideologies necessitates referring to two key policy documents: the "Plan for Modernisation in Education by 2035" (China Government Website 2019) and the "Report on the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China" (China Embassy 2022).

"Plan for Modernisation in Education by 2035"

On 23 February 2019, the State Council of China announced the adoption of a plan for modernising the education sector for the next 15 years (up to 2035) (China Government Website 2019).

The plan includes several main objectives aimed at reforming the education system, namely:

- structuring the educational process to ensure the comprehensive development of students;
- ensuring equal access to education for all segments of the population;
- providing opportunities for lifelong educational services;
- enhancing the overall quality of education;
- raising the level of professional training for educational personnel;
- extensive use of information technology in the educational process;
- implementing measures to increase the level of internationalisation of education;
- deepening efforts to study Xi Jinping's ideas;
- maintaining a high level of education with Chinese characteristics;
- optimising administrative processes in the field of education.

The document also emphasises the need to adhere to the fundamental principles of Marxism, take into account the specificity of national conditions, and work on improving the personal characteristics of students.

Questions regarding the education of marginalised population groups are indirectly reflected in such provisions as the compulsory nature of education, whereby education should be characterised by balance and of sufficiently high quality, creating conditions for children and adolescents with disabilities to receive education (including higher education), ensuring integration of education and medicine, and emphasising the importance of family and social education. Attention is drawn to the necessity of giving special consideration to rural areas and ultimately achieving the goal of balancing urban and rural education. The plan envisages the development of a system for standardising knowledge and creating a system for assessing students from migrating families to

ensure the continuity of their education. It is also anticipated to provide targeted assistance in the form of financial support.

Aspects conducive to critical education can be identified in the provisions advocating for the necessity of orienting towards innovative educational programmes, fostering talent development, and employing heuristic and research-based teaching methods. Additionally, the opportunity for independent course selection and its practical orientation can be highlighted as positive aspects. The plan envisages enhancing research activity in colleges and universities and establishing analytical centres. It is essential to raise the standards for the professional qualities of educators and their readiness to utilise innovative models, alongside addressing ethical considerations as a fundamental characteristic of professionalism.

"Report on the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China"

Another document containing fundamental provisions relevant to this research is the "Report on the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China" (China Embassy 2022). This report elucidates contemporary Chinese approaches to utilising Marxist theory. It outlines the fundamental tenets of domestic policy concerning education and addressing social issues that lead to the emergence of marginalised groups.

Notably, the report articulates for the first time a new approach to Marxist theory, termed the "Sinicisation and modernisation of Marxism". Beyond the traditional acknowledgement of Marxism as a guiding ideology, several guiding principles were established. These include the continuous modernisation of Marxist principles in alignment with Chinese specificities, the paramount importance of the populace, and the development of all theories aimed at their welfare. The report emphasises systematic actions and problem-oriented approaches. Theoretically, all these principles apply to organising educational work with marginalised groups.

From the perspective of critical pedagogy, it is essential to emphasise fostering innovative change. This emphasis underscores the necessity of adhering firmly to Marxist principles while simultaneously studying and orienting decisions based on the unique characteristics of the new era and the practical needs of life. It suggests formulating and expressing new ideas to address contemporary problems. This formulation effectively empowers educational practitioners to present material in a manner that considers existing conditions and teaches students to make decisions based on the evaluation of current circumstances, reflecting the methodology of critical pedagogy.

The report also articulates ambitious goals for achieving universal prosperity and preventing any polarisation, directly indicating that the lack of material affluence (alongside spiritual culture) is a sign of the failure to achieve socialism. It stresses the need for ongoing efforts in developing rural areas and coordinating regional

development overall. While these goals are not explicitly stated, their achievement would significantly reduce the formation of marginalised groups and, consequently, the number of related issues, including those in education.

Thus, the analysis of these documents confirms the existence of plans and methodological foundations for the continued advancement of critical pedagogy in Chinese education. It should be noted that the generally high level of education among the Chinese population effectively eliminates the issue of access to education as a cause for the emergence of marginalised groups.

When discussing the Chinese path of developing critical pedagogy, the primary focus should not be on the direction of fostering critical thinking among students. Instead, while maintaining the connection between theoretical knowledge and its application in evaluating social reality, it is crucial to emphasise the assessment of these realities in accordance with the guiding principles of the Party and the Chinese government and their alignment with Marxist theory.

A second important component in the development of critical pedagogy, specifically regarding the improvement of the welfare of marginalised student groups, is the adaptation of educational programmes to meet the needs and conditions of specific educational institutions, particularly those serving students from certain marginalised groups. This adaptation should follow two vectors: The first involves expanding opportunities for students with special needs, including informing them about such opportunities. The second vector should focus on students who are not part of marginalised groups, aiming to enhance their social responsibility and tolerance.

Marginalised Learners' Perceptions of Elements of Critical Pedagogy

Access to education in general and the availability of support while in an educational institution are two of the main factors for which the national education system is responsible. A study of how successful attempts at mitigating these challenges appear from the learners' perspective revealed the following results (Table 1).

Table 1: Success in solving tasks to support students from marginalised groups from the perspective of students themselves (developed by the author on the basis of 150 student questionnaires)

Question	Yes / Always	Preferably yes / Sometimes	Preferably no / Never	Difficult to answer / No answer
Do you feel you have the same educational opportunities as other students in your school?	61 (40.67%)	44 (29.33%)	29 (19.33%)	16 (10.67%)
Do you receive support from teachers and other students about difficulties in your life that affect your learning?	42 (28%)	51(34%)	39 (26%)	18 (12%)
Does your learning community discuss life issues that may affect your educational opportunities?	34 (22.67%)	44 (29.33%)	45 (30%)	27 (18%)

Thus, we can speak of two problems that remain topical and require the state's attention. Firstly, there is a need to strengthen targeted support for families of marginalised groups with children, as the level of confidence in equal educational opportunities remains at a rather low level. There is also an internal problem of educational institutions themselves, when students from marginalised groups do not receive adequate personal support. In terms of applying the tools of critical pedagogy, it is important to note that not enough attention is paid to discussing social issues.

Also, an important element of critical pedagogy in terms of its impact on students from marginalised groups is their active inclusion in the educational process through the use of elements of critical pedagogy. The study of this element showed the following results (Table 2).

Table 2: Inclusion of students from marginalised groups in the educational process through the use of elements of critical pedagogy (developed by the author on the basis of 150 student questionnaires)

Question	Yes	Partly / Sometimes	No	Difficult to answer / No answer
Do you have the opportunity to express your opinion freely in front of teachers and classmates?	54 (36%)	51 (34%)	30 (20%)	15 (10%)
Do you agree with the statement that independent enquiry is more appreciated by teachers?	66 (44%)	42 (28%)	30 (20%)	12 (8%)
Do you have the opportunity to participate in the development of decisions concerning the life of the school?	21(14%)	45 (30%)	54 (36%)	30 (20%)
Do you have information about the rights you have in relation to your family's difficulties or your individual needs?	39 (26%)	48 (32%)	59 (39.33%)	4 (2.67%)

The assessment of the results of the answers to this block, first of all, points to the need for more active inclusion of students in the decision-making process concerning the life of the school. The second important aspect is the need to raise awareness of the rights and additional opportunities of students belonging to marginalised groups. More active implementation of critical pedagogy tools could have a significant positive effect in addressing the problems identified through the questionnaire.

Discussion

Turning to the scholarly discussion that is relevant to the findings of this study, it should first be noted that the peculiarity demonstrated in the study of the development of Marxist theory in China as an ideological tool is confirmed. Philosophical discourse remains only a means of "reformatting" Marxist theory in such a way that it serves as a means of justifying CCP policies (Zhao, Kennedy, and Yang 2024). This approach does more to create ideological consensus than to develop critical awareness (Ford 2024). As a result, a situation has emerged in which the prospect of real educational reforms aimed at improving the quality of education and promoting inclusion has been confronted by unduly rigid control, which has significantly reduced the effectiveness of the reforms (Cheng and Li 2024). The questionnaire survey conducted in this study confirmed the validity of this assertion when respondents' involvement in real social problems and attention to these problems themselves were low.

A pertinent issue in critical pedagogy concerns the methods for conveying information in ways that resonate most with students, prompting them to engage in independent

analysis and form their own positions. Zembylas (2018) highlights that the effectiveness of critical pedagogy and its ability to initiate both personal and social change largely depends on how well the pedagogical methods employed can elicit an emotional response while simultaneously maintaining control over the situation and individual behaviour. In the context of the present study, this issue is significant for organising interactions between students who belong to marginalised groups and those who do not, as well as for fostering a general approach to cultivating social responsibility.

Since critical pedagogy is often associated with postcolonial issues, it is interesting to compare approaches to elite education in the United Kingdom and China. Gamsu, Ashe, and Arday (2024) view elite schools as a legacy of colonial policy, perpetuating social inequality and promoting corresponding pedagogical ideas. In contrast, Liu (2024) indicates that Chinese elite schools base their education on deep engagement in social relationships, generating their intellectual capital initially embedded within the middle class. Thus, a completely different model of elite education is established, aimed at understanding social realities and expanding opportunities for all students. This thesis was substantiated through the analysis of programmatic aspects of educational development in China.

Issues related to improving the quality of education for marginalised groups or creating conditions that meet their special needs also require particular attention. It is noted that approaches that differ from standard methods for organising education for such students can elicit mixed reactions. For instance, in addressing the provision of special opportunities and guarantees in education for religious minorities as outlined in the Indian Constitution, Bhatia (2019) points out that such education should, on the one hand, meet their cultural needs, but also, on the other hand, adhere to educational standards. Thus, expanding educational opportunities for marginalised groups should consider that the limitation of such access might not stem from governmental restrictions for certain social groups but rather from their internal cultural constraints. In such cases, the state's role would be to ensure the elimination of these constraints. The conducted study showed that China's educational development plans include both goals of improving education quality and the development of inclusive forms of education, as well as the creation of adequate tools to ensure the continuity of the educational process for migrant children. This should not affect the educational standards for the rest of the student population.

Controversial issues related to critical pedagogy also include the question of individual regional differences in critical thinking propensity. Discussing the Chinese characteristics in the approach to developing critical thinking, Dong (2015) notes that Chinese education faced difficulties due to a fundamental predisposition of Chinese students towards a non-critical approach. Later, the ability of Chinese students to think critically was examined by Fan and See (2022) in relation to local professors' low assessments of this ability in Chinese students studying at foreign universities. However, the study's results did not allow for a definitive conclusion regarding whether

and how critical thinking differs between Chinese students and students of other nationalities. This issue was not addressed in the research but undoubtedly deserves further investigation in the context of employing critical pedagogy methods. Nonetheless, it can be preliminarily noted that comparing the critical thinking abilities of subjects in their familiar social and linguistic environment with those studying in a foreign educational institution requires prior adjustment, taking into account the objective conditions of such an experiment.

Different positions are also expressed regarding whether critical pedagogy has its path of development in China. Zhuoyuan (2024) denies such a possibility. At the same time, it should be noted that the researcher contradicts himself by characterising the development of critical pedagogy ideas in China as a class theory aimed at solving problems arising in the field of education, specifically in a capitalist society. However, the researcher acknowledges the application of critical pedagogy methods in addressing broader social issues, such as student evaluation criteria, gender inequality, and education-related issues associated with migration problems. Another position regarding the uniqueness of the development of critical pedagogy in China is held by Zhu and Li (2018), who note that the model of modern Chinese education can be seen as one that seeks to comprehensively consider trends in contemporary pedagogy in combination with traditional Chinese values and a focus on talent development and adherence to the guidance of the CPC. They argue that contemporary higher education in China sets requirements for the teaching staff that enable them to influence students in line with contemporary ethical standards and an understanding of the uniqueness of Chinese society's social structure, ensuring a balance between personal and societal interests. Li et al. (2020) also note that modern higher education in China sets standards for faculty that enable them to guide students according to current ethical norms and an awareness of the distinctive features of Chinese society's social structure, while maintaining a balance between individual aspirations and the interests of the broader community.

The question of the applicability and limitations of critical pedagogy in the contemporary Chinese context necessitates a detailed analysis of China's social, political, and educational realities.

Critical pedagogy—a concept traditionally associated with Marxist and neo-Marxist thought—aims to foster reflective thinking, uncover structures of inequality and oppression, and promote social change through education. However, the specific features of the Chinese educational system, which is highly ideologised and centrally controlled, pose significant challenges to its implementation.

One key aspect concerns working with marginalised communities in China. Although socially disadvantaged groups such as ethnic minorities, women, and rural migrants are formally acknowledged in political discourse, a critical interrogation of the causes of their marginalisation is constrained by institutional limitations. For example, the

situation of migrant children is often described in terms of socio-economic hardship. Yet, the role of state policy in shaping these conditions is rarely the subject of open academic debate.

Another crucial issue is the definition of critical pedagogy within the Chinese context. In its classical formulation, the concept entails the capacity for critical analysis of social structures that perpetuate inequality. However, in China, the scope for such critique is significantly restricted by state regulation of educational content and narratives that may be publicly discussed. As a result, critical pedagogy in China takes a modified form, focusing on issues such as personal development, educational integration, and social mobility rather than a fundamental critique of the existing system.

In this context, it is appropriate to raise the question of whether critical pedagogy can be meaningfully applied in China. While certain educational initiatives demonstrate that critical thinking and analysis of social issues may be fostered through discussions of culture, the environment, economic development, or technological change—areas that are relatively less politically sensitive—the degree of institutional autonomy in these matters remains questionable. In addition, in terms of the challenges of implementing critical pedagogy in a more global context, it is worth noting the uncertainty of China's political and economic identity itself (Chen-Florea and Larsen 2025), where, under the conditions of declared socialism, there are still significant social gaps between different categories of the population, including in the field of education, which contradicts the very idea of critical pedagogy.

Despite the numerous challenges confronting the implementation of critical pedagogy in China, its potential should not be dismissed. The development of this concept within the Chinese context is likely to proceed through a gradual process of adaptation to existing social and political conditions, which both enable and constrain its realisation.

Conclusions

China ranks among the countries with a high literacy rate; yet, this does not preclude the existence of marginalised groups in the education sphere. The problem, in this case, lies not in access to education itself but in social issues hindering certain groups of students from receiving quality education. Children with disabilities, abandoned children, individuals with disabilities, and migrant children are just a few examples of those falling into marginalised groups in the field of education.

The idea of critical pedagogy, based on the necessity not only to grasp a certain amount of theoretical information but also to develop practical skills in applying this knowledge to social reality, significantly expands students' opportunities and contributes to enhancing their active stance regarding positive social changes. Such an approach directly follows the postulates of Marxist ethics regarding the necessity of caring for the common good.

The inclusion of marginalised groups in societal life entails two essential elements: society's ability to recognise the existing social problem and the ability of representatives of marginalised groups to articulate this problem. In this sense, critical education enhances the capabilities of society as a whole by leading individuals from different social strata to comprehend the issue through their capacity for critical assessment of the situation. The application of critical pedagogy methods in education impacts students across all segments of the population, expanding opportunities for marginalised groups by increasing their awareness of their potential and raising students' overall awareness of existing social issues.

Chinese policy documents in the field of education and the overall development of Chinese society do not specifically highlight critical pedagogy as a separate direction nor consider it as a tool for improving educational conditions and overall life for marginalised groups. However, a contextual analysis of the content of such documents suggests an orientation of contemporary Chinese pedagogy towards the use of innovative methods, the development of students' critical thinking, and the enhancement of their level of social responsibility, as well as the inclusion of provisions aimed at meeting the needs of specific population groups facing objective social difficulties. Moreover, the foundation for conducting this work remains rooted in the principles of Marxism and the careful consideration of national culture and traditions, allowing for the identification of a distinct path for the development of Chinese critical pedagogy.

The findings of this study can be utilised in the development of policy guidelines in the field of education, as well as in the practical activities of education professionals, including teachers. Further research directions may involve the development of specific methodological approaches for working with individual marginalised groups.

Acknowledgement

6. Quality Engineering Project of Suzhou University: Research on the Teaching Mode of Ideological and Political Theory Courses in Higher Continuing Education (szxy2025jyjf75);

7. Scientific Research Development Fund Projects of Suzhou University: Research on the Innovation of Cultural Education Model in Local Undergraduate Universities Empowered by Artificial Intelligence (2025fzjj41);

8. Research on the Model Construction and Path Innovation of Ideological and Political Education in University Continuing Education Empowered by Artificial Intelligence (2025fzjj42).

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