

Vouchers again? Recent experience with early education vouchers in Hong Kong

International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy
of Childcare International Seminar 9 November 2010

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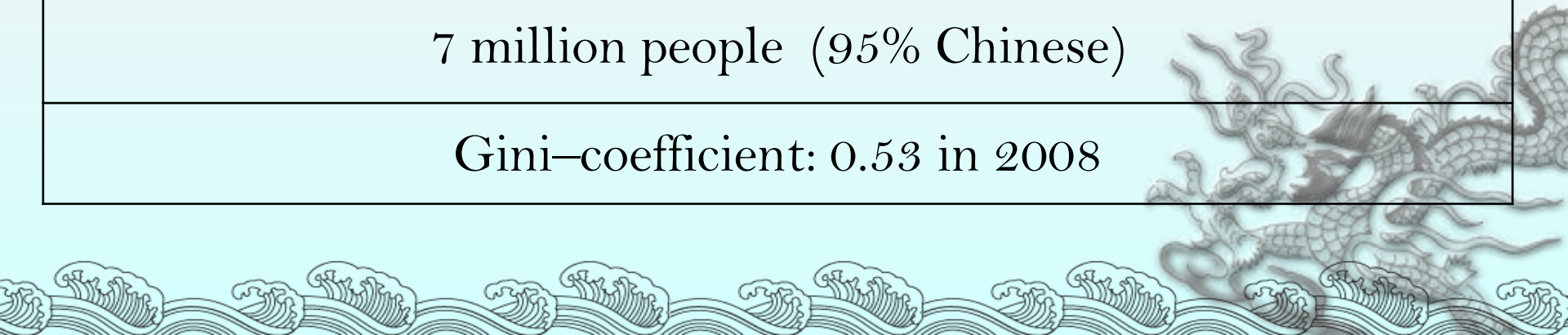
Today's Presentation

- ◆ Contextual backgrounds
- ◆ The voucher scheme as a new policy for ECE
- ◆ Summary of findings of three studies
- ◆ Looking back and way forward
- ◆ Discussion



About Hong Kong

Britain	China
A colony 1842 – 1997 (30/6)	A special administrative region <i>One country, two systems</i>
Executive-led government	
Milton Friedman: “The world’s greatest experiment in laissez-faire capitalism” <i>(The Economist, 9 September 2010)</i>	
7 million people (95% Chinese)	
Gini-coefficient: 0.53 in 2008	



Education System

3-year kindergarten education

- ◆ Private (mostly non-profit-making)

12-year primary and secondary education

- ◆ 6 years primary + 3 years junior secondary education (free and universal)
- ◆ 3 years senior secondary education (free)

Vocational and post-secondary education

3-year university education



Early Childhood Education and Care System

Ages 0-3

- ❖ Social Welfare Department
- ❖ Child care centers
 - Crèches (ages 0-2)
 - Kindergarten-cum-child care centers (ages 2-3)
- ❖ Predominantly full-day

Ages 3-6

- ❖ Education Bureau
- ❖ Kindergartens
 - Kindergarten-cum-child care centers (mostly full-day, provided by nurseries)
- ❖ Predominantly half-day (bi-session)

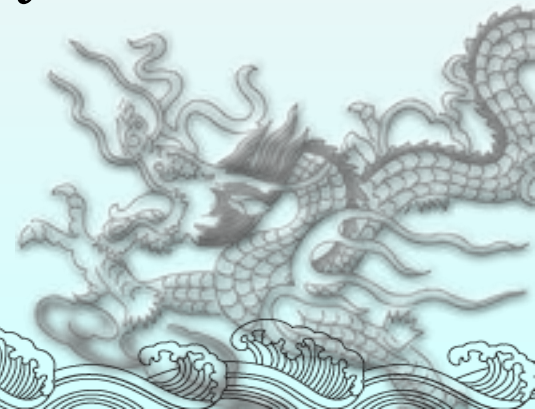


The Voucher Scheme

Why ECE?

- ◆ “profoundly influence the likely success of young people as they progress through education”
- ◆ “preserve the existing flexibility and adaptability of kindergartens”
- ◆ “avoid imposing the elaborate regulatory controls”

(Education Bureau, 2006)



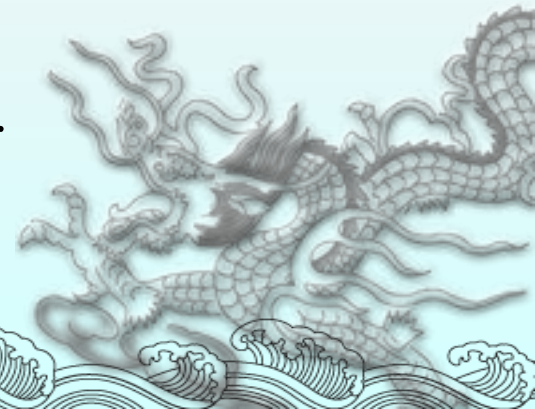
The Voucher Scheme

Problematic Policy Process

- ◆ Policy consultation – *inadequate* – contention
- ◆ Policy debate – *technocratic* – division
- ◆ Policy decision – *top-down* – anxiety
- ◆ Policy implementation – *rushed* – confusion

Review by the Legislative Council in 2002

*No conclusive findings for the effects of voucher
on improving education quality*



The Voucher Scheme

Vision

- ◆ To provide affordable and quality pre-primary education to all school-aged children

Achieved through (first cycle 2007-2012)

- ◆ Direct fee subsidy for parents (non-means tested)
- ◆ Well-qualified teaching staff
- ◆ Accountability measures



The Voucher Scheme

Eligibility

- ◆ Children aged 3 to 6
- ◆ Non-profit-making kindergartens
- ◆ Providing a local curriculum
- ◆ Tuition fees within the capped amounts for half-day and full-day services



The Voucher Scheme

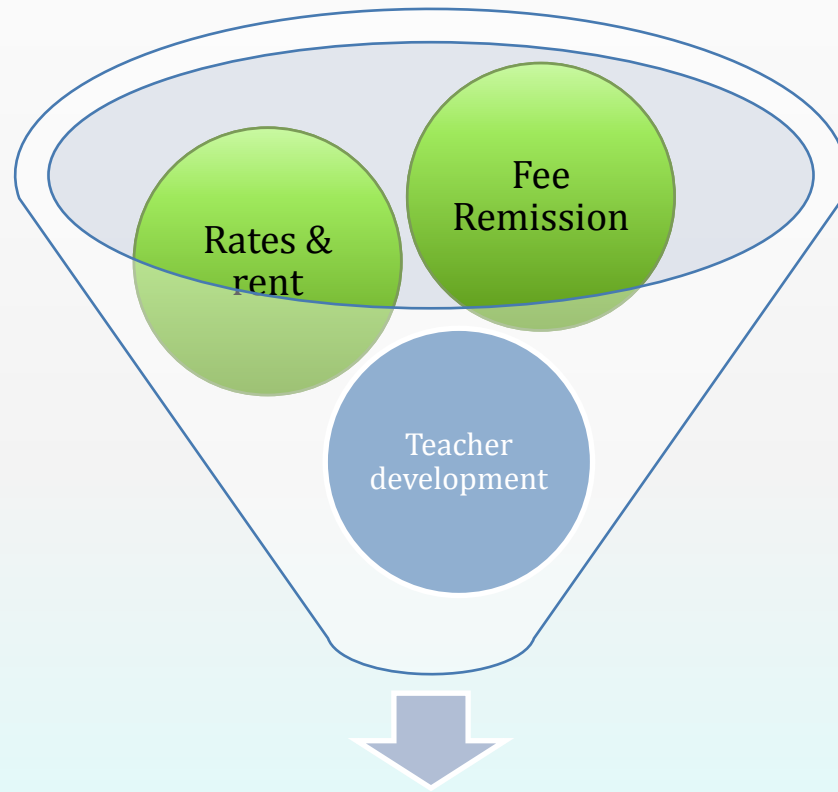
Other Related Policy Measures

Parents

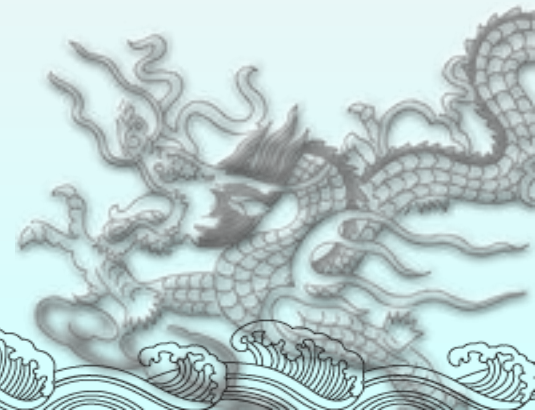
- Maximum amounts of the fee remission scheme (means tested) for half-day and full-day services kept the same for five years
- Subsuming fee remission and rent/rates reimbursement schemes under voucher

Kindergartens

- ☒ Direct subsidy for operators
- ☒ Recommended salary scale for teachers
- Basis for calculating voucher: *per-head* and *half-day*
- Teacher development subsidy included in the voucher value
- One-off school development fund
- QA approval to stay on the scheme

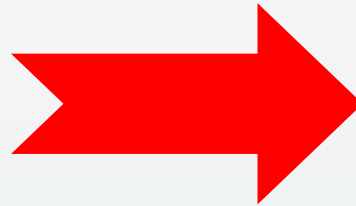


Voucher value



Tuition Fee ↑
Costs shifting

Kindergarten



Parent

Kindergarten & Child Care
Center Subsidy Scheme
Rent & Rates Reimbursement

Fee Remission Scheme
(caps same for 5 years)



Summary of Three Studies

Pilot Study	Second Study	Third Study
2007-2008	2010	2010
Parents' Choice of ECE Services	Parents' Use of Full-day Service	Teachers' Work & Professional Development
Qualitative	Quantitative	Quantitative
Interviews & focus group discussions	Questionnaire survey	Questionnaire survey
86 parents (of children aged 3)	10,206 parents (of children aged 3 to 6)	1,445 teachers (random sample)
Kindergartens & nurseries	Nurseries	Kindergartens & nurseries
-	61.9% (response)	57.8% (response)

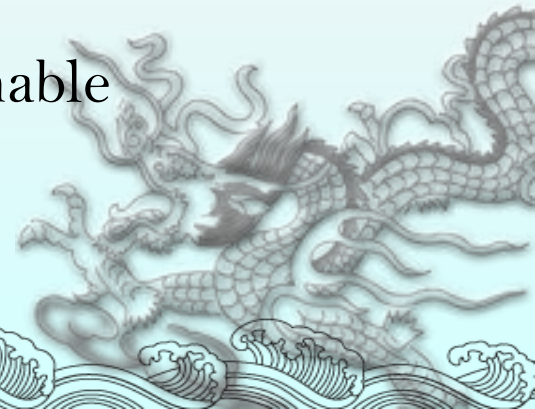
Central Themes of the Studies

- ◆ Parents' decision making on an ECE service appropriate for their children – What? How? Why?
- ◆ Parents' views of quality service
- ◆ Teachers' work and the work environment
- ◆ Parents' and teachers' views on the policy and its effects



Assumptions to Question

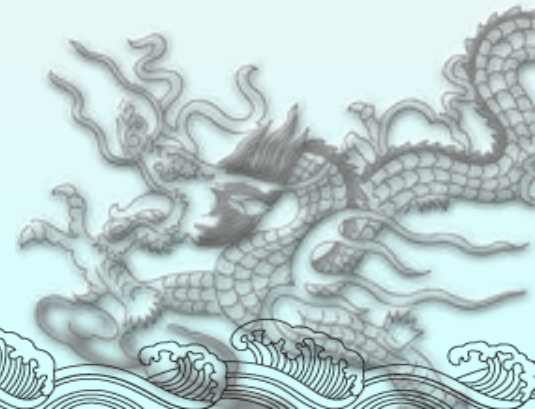
- ◆ Parents can make informed choice on appropriate and quality ECE services for their children.
- ◆ All eligible parents can benefit from the voucher scheme.
- ◆ Financial assistance and transparency of school operation are sufficient enough to promote free choice.
- ◆ Professional upgrading and quality assurance alone can enhance quality.
- ◆ Market competition can create a favourable environment for facilitating professional practices.
- ◆ The market mechanism can support the sustainable development of quality ECE.



Key Findings (parents)

Affordable Choice

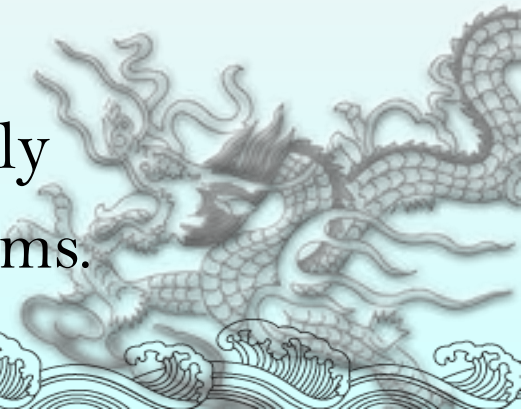
- ◆ Parents who *used full-day service* and who *applied for tuition subsidy* were most negative about the scheme.
- ◆ Parents with *lower SES* tended to view that the scheme benefited the middle income families.
- ◆ Some parents who *applied for tuition subsidy* had to pay more than before.



Key Findings (parents)

Affordable Choice

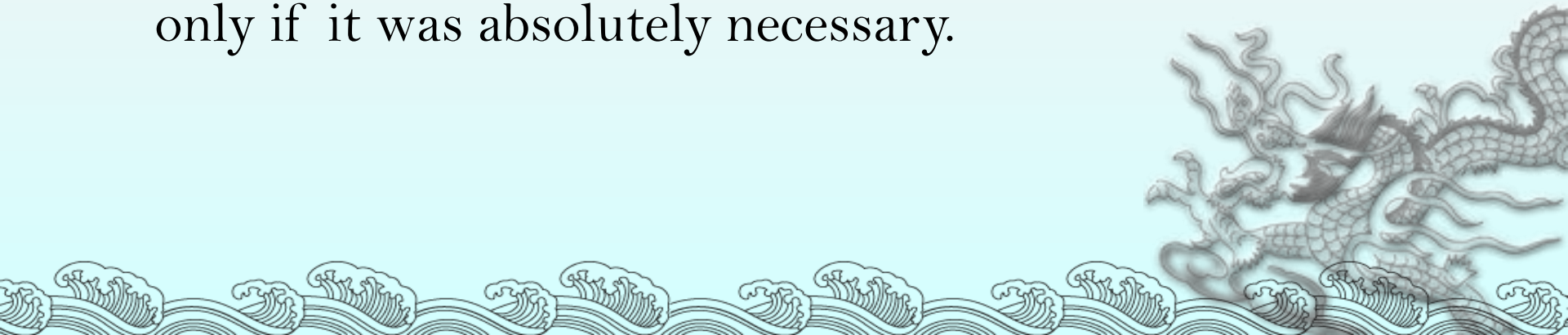
- ◆ *The higher the family income*, the more likely parents of full-day service viewed that the scheme had helped reduce their financial burden, as well as allow them to spare money for other learning opportunities of their children.
- ◆ Parents of full-day service that *did not apply for tuition subsidy* were more likely to agree/strongly agree that their financial burden was reduced.
- ◆ *K3 parents* of full-day service were more likely to disagree/strongly disagree on the two items.



Key Findings (parents)

Free choice

- ◆ Parents with *higher SES* tended to access information on services through multiple means, including printed materials, advice from others, and direct experiences.
- ◆ Mixed views on having more choices of service
- ◆ Parents would not consider switching service only if it was absolutely necessary.



Key Findings (parents)

Free Choice

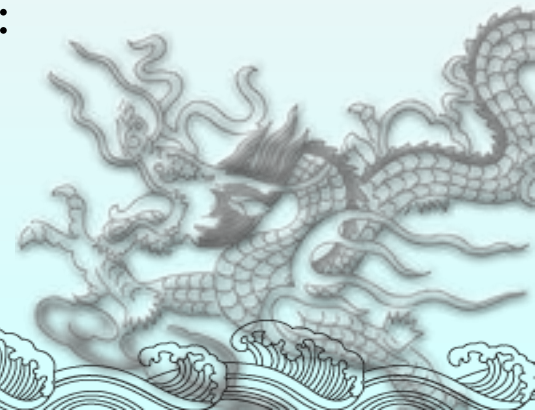
- ◆ Reasons of choosing of full-day service: *practical situations* of the family and *education aspirations* for the child
- ◆ Two of the key selection criteria for service: *location (proximity)* and *tuition fee*
- ◆ *The lower the family income*, the more likely parents of full-day service would consider location and tuition fee.
- ◆ A very strong desire of parents for the government to provide universal ECE



Key Findings (parents)

Quality Choice

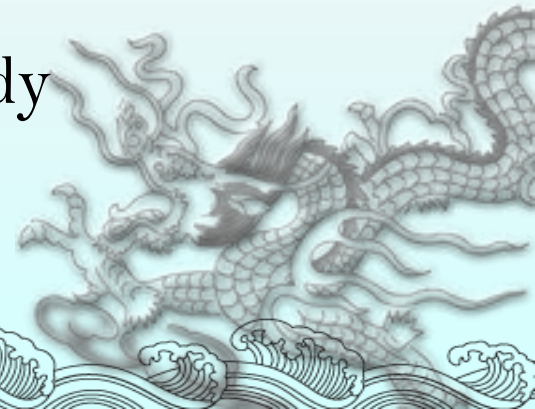
- ◆ Parents' understanding of “quality” reflected complex interactions among policy, choice, and practices situated in a market context.
- ◆ Parents of different SES tended to differ in emphasis on what they expected their children to gain from ECE.
- ◆ Deciding if the service was the best choice:
 - ◆ *happy learning and happy child*
 - ◆ *good teacher-child relationships*



Key Findings (parents)

Quality Choice

- ◆ Over half of the parents of full-day service indicated that *teachers were frequently changed* and that *teachers' work and pressure were increased* as a result of the scheme.
- ◆ Groups more likely to agree/strongly agree on these items:
 - Parents with lower family income
 - Parents with lower educational level
 - Parents that applied for tuition subsidy
 - K3 parents
 - Mothers



Key Findings (teachers)

Quality Choice

- ◆ Teachers reported increased workload in all the jobs that they did in the past three years, including the least satisfying non-teaching jobs:

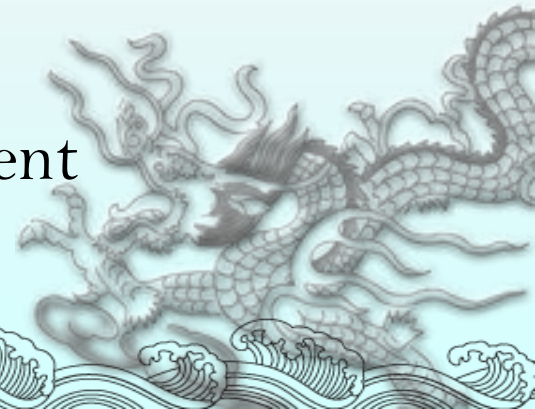
Quality assurance

School operation

School administrative meetings

Interest classes

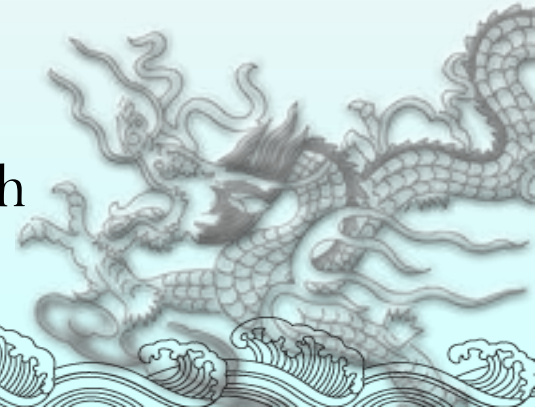
School promotion & student recruitment



Key Findings (teachers)

Quality Choice

- ◆ Most teachers *did not think* that :
 - ❖ The scheme had reflected the government's commitment to ECE.
 - ❖ Increased transparency of school operation had ensured a reasonable salary.
 - ❖ Salary adjustment had become more reasonable with the adoption of a market mechanism.
 - ❖ They were much valued when compared with primary or secondary teachers.



Key Findings (teachers)

Quality Choice

- ◆ Teachers reported issues relating to the scheme:
 - ❖ Difficulties in hiring substitute teachers
 - ❖ Frequent staff turnover, leading to increase in workload and demoralization
- ◆ Teachers working in public housing estates and small kindergartens scored significantly lower/higher than teachers of other types of estate in many items

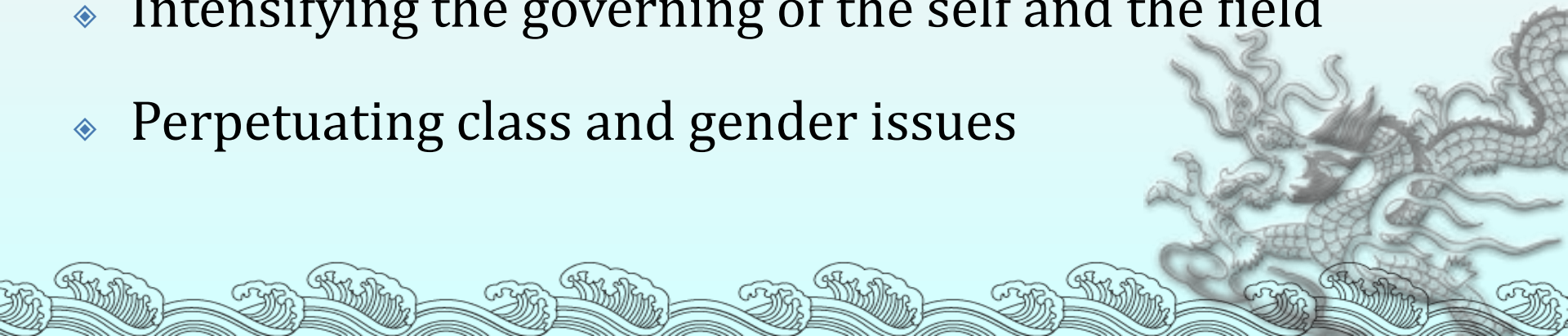


Technical vs. Political/Philosophical Debates

Voucher as an act of ...

(Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009; Yuen, 2010a, 2010b)

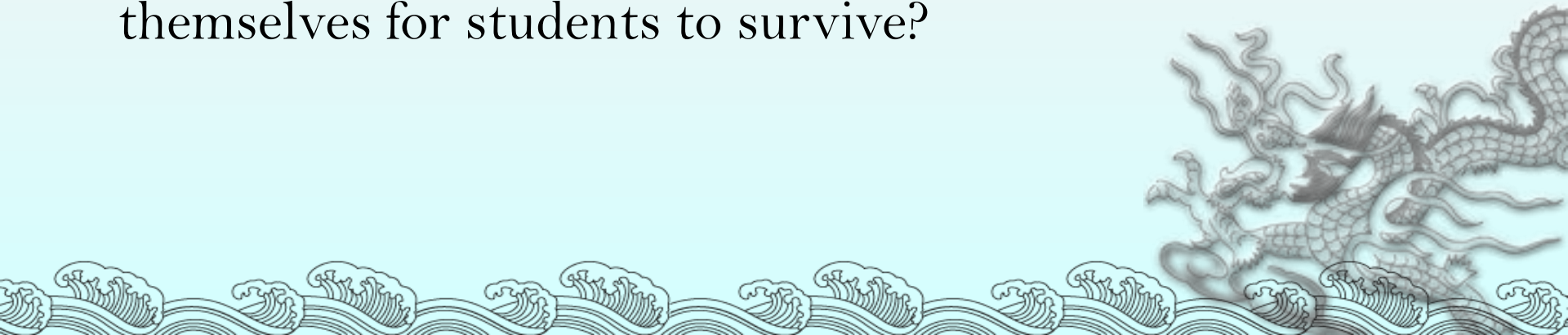
- ◆ Re-privatization
- ◆ Normalizing the marginalized positions of ECE in education and child care in ECE
- ◆ Intensifying the governing of the self and the field
- ◆ Perpetuating class and gender issues



Questions Left Unanswered

To what extent can the voucher scheme...

1. which gives subsidy directly to parents, effectively dampen the “parent-centered” practices deeply entrenched in the field by the market forces?
2. provide a stable and collegial work environment for teachers when service providers have to compete among themselves for students to survive?



Questions Left Unanswered

To what extent can the voucher scheme...

3. claim that quality ECE is provided when the close relation between cost and quality has not been truly recognized?
4. create more spaces for all young children where they can have equitable and equal opportunities to learn and develop themselves as a visible group of citizens in society?



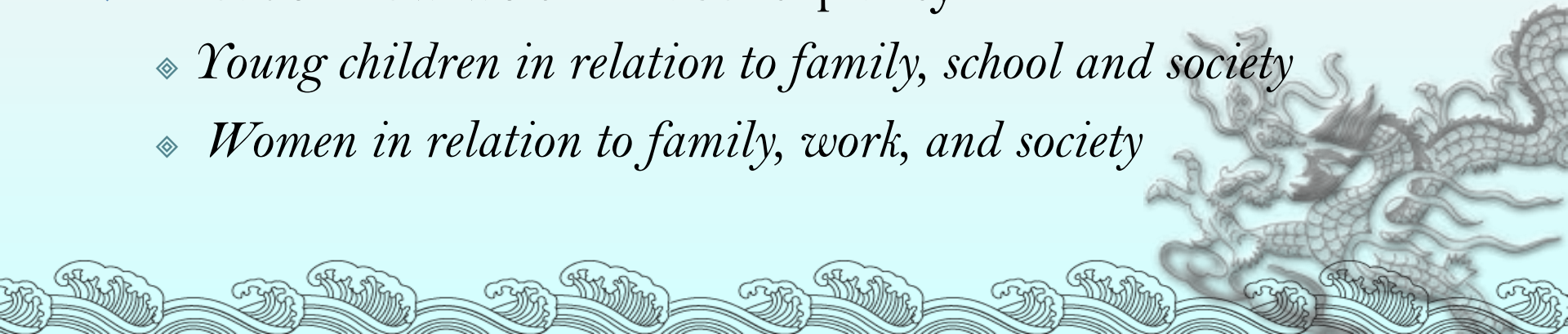
ECE Developments in Asia

- ◆ Macau – 3-year free kindergarten education
- ◆ Taiwan – moving away from voucher to provide free education for children aged 5
- ◆ South Korea – free education and child care for children aged 5



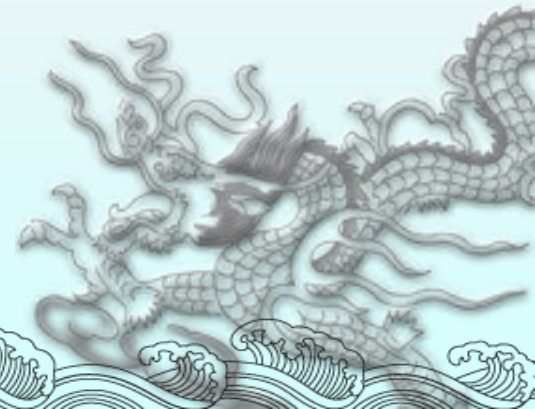
Policy Implications

- ◆ Rethink the market approach as the self-evident solution for dealing with educational issues rooted in decades of market practices and in a specific sociocultural context
 - ◆ *Explore alternatives for paradigm shift*
- ◆ Build policy framework and coherence on democratic participation of key stakeholders
 - ◆ *Parents, teachers, principals, and children alike*
- ◆ Broaden how we think about quality
 - ◆ *Young children in relation to family, school and society*
 - ◆ *Women in relation to family, work, and society*



New Study

- ◆ A territory-wide study on the impact of the voucher scheme on parents' choice of early childhood education services
- ◆ Funded by the Central Policy Unit of the Hong Kong Government
- ◆ October 2010 – March 2012
- ◆ Mixed-method research design



References

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- ◆ Yuen, G. (2010). Early childhood education development in Hong Kong: The market model and the voucher scheme (in Chinese). *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood*, 8 (2), 11-16. [in Chinese]
- ◆ Yuen, G., & Grieshaber, S. (2009). Parents' choice of early childhood education services in Hong Kong: A pilot study about vouchers. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 10 (3), 263-279.

