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TITLE: The Fetishism of Commodities and Erosion of Professional Ethics: Rural Teachers in Neoliberal China

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The economic reforms in China since late 1970s have brought unprecedented commodification and marketization to the educational system. The state shifted the financial burden to parents by reconceptualizing education as a commodity governed by market mechanisms. The reform opened the opportunity for public schools and individual teachers to charge fees under numerous names, resulting in the ethical degeneration among the teaching profession.

This study interprets the ethical decline among rural teachers in China from Marx's theory of fetishism of commodities. Drawing from ethnographic observations of a rural school, this research does find serious ethical erosion among the rural teachers. On the one hand, captured by the fetishism of commodity, they were ready to convert their social relations with students to the relation of monetary exchange. On the other hand, their ethical misconducts could be conscious "revenge" against the larger social inequality they have been suffering from the capitalist reforms.

The paper theorizes the ethical deterioration among Chinese teachers as an inevitable tendency resulting from the fetishism of commodities intrinsic to the capitalist society. The moral misconducts of the rural teachers pose an interrogation on the general social justice as well as the moral ramifications of inequality under capitalism.