

## Education as a Means to a Better Life in China

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One of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) formidable challenges was to reconcile the populist, egalitarian aims of the socialist state with social hierarchies produced by the 'sorting' function of education systems. One of the CCP's primary objectives was to provide universal education. However, due to its limited resources, the CCP was forced to severely compromise the quality of education if it was to provide equal opportunity to all. By the mid 1950s, this policy was proving itself ineffective. It was becoming evident that the education system was not capable of producing the highly educated individuals China needed to foster industrial development. So began a long process of compromising, attempting to provide adequate rural education, but fundamentally relying on the cities to fuel the burgeoning command economy. With the confirmed success of the First Five Year Plan, Mao shifted his focus from the industrial to the agricultural domain. Thus began the 'walking on two legs' approach to education, where rural education would strive to meet the needs of rural production and urban education would follow a more traditional academic stream to meet the needs of urban production. However, education was not providing equal opportunities to all. This conflict manifested itself with the Cultural Revolution's educational policies, which attempted to purge all 'bourgeois' influences in the educational system. The CCP tried to grapple with the sorting function by equalizing the standards of all schools. The quality of education dropped, academic preeminence was replaced by political history, familial history, and political status as the main quantifier for enrolment in schools. However, education remained the path to a better life in the city, although it was still not universal. Despite the CCP's attempt to provide an 'egalitarian' system of education, a selective education system could never be truly egalitarian or populist until it stopped being the gateway to a better life in the city.

The early 1950s were characterized by the motto ‘take the Soviet Union as a teacher.’ This stretched from economic development, to education and beyond. In terms of economic development, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) devised the First Five Year Plan (FFYP) on the basis of the Soviet Union’s Five Year Plan model, with focus placed on the development and expansion of heavy industry.<sup>1</sup> The Soviet education system, however, had to be adapted to fit the realities of China. The PRC simply did not have the resources to provide universal education *and* fully centralize the educational system with uniform materials, teachers, teaching conditions, and most importantly, standards, throughout China.<sup>2</sup>

Mao had likened himself to the ‘Yan’an way’ of education. This method, which had been developed in the CCP’s Yan’an base prior to 1949 was a highly informal system, designed primarily for peasants and to cater to the needs of the locality. It valued practical knowledge more than academic, and was an attractive alternative to a standardized system because it could be widely established at a very low cost.<sup>3</sup> The schools were run and funded locally, with little to no directives from the government. This approach, called *minban*, was the CCP’s answer to the problem of providing universal education, for it did not have the resources to create a centralized, standardized nationwide system.<sup>4</sup>

However, the personnel needs of the First Five Year Plan required a level of education that was out of the reach of the *minban* system. Therefore, the CCP was forced to downsize the education system and concentrate its resources in a smaller, high quality system. Suzanne Pepper quotes the CCP’s 25 October 1951 Report on Culture and Education Work, “[China

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (Boston: W.W. Norton & Company, Incorporated, 1999), 514, 516.

<sup>2</sup> Suzanne Pepper, “Post Mao Reforms in Chinese Education: Can the Ghosts of the Past be Laid to Rest?” in *Chinese Education: Problems, Policies, and Prospects*, ed. Irving Epstein (New York: Garland Science, 1999), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Chengzhi Wang, “Minban Education: The Planned elimination of the ‘people-managed’ teachers in reforming China,” *International Journal of Educational Development* 22:2 (March 2002).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

needs to] adjust and consolidate, develop key points, raise quality, advance steadily.”<sup>5</sup> Previously, in an effort to decrease the discrepancies between the urban and rural sectors, the CCP had granted priority to peasants and workers in irregular schools for university admission.<sup>6</sup> The school system was organized into three separate streams. There was the traditional academic stream (*put-ong*), a specialized school stream (*zhongzhaun*) and the short-lived worker peasant short-course middle schools. Worker-peasant short course middle schools, however, were simply not of satisfactory caliber, and worker/peasant students found themselves failing out of university, thus not helping meet personnel demands of the burgeoning industrial sector. Consequently, these schools were abolished in 1955.<sup>7</sup>

The CCP chose to concentrate its educational investments in the cities and industrial districts, creating high quality schools designed to feed into universities and create the highly trained personnel needed to run heavy industry.<sup>8</sup> For the time being, “the priority placed on rapidly developing urban higher-level education limited the resources available for basic educational expansion; allocation of resources for basic education prioritized small numbers of urban ‘key-point’ schools likely to produce quick results.”<sup>9</sup> Old private schools from the GMD-era were converted into state-funded schools which had a concentration of the best supplies, the best teachers and the brightest students. The rationale was that an exclusive set of schools, set within the academic stream, was needed to create highly educated personnel to fulfill the goals of the FFYP.

The specialized schools also catered to the needs of the command economy. These schools were oriented towards people of worker-peasant backgrounds. The time in school was compressed, from two to four years, while in the regular stream, secondary schooling lasted

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<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China: The Search for an Ideal Development Model* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2000), 182.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 190.

<sup>8</sup> Emily Hannum, “Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China, 1949-1990,” *Comparative Education Review*, 43 (May 1999), 197.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

six.<sup>10</sup> Rather than focus on academics, these schools focused on one narrow specialization to train individuals quickly to fill specific roles in the economy. Specializations included everything from teacher-training, to agriculture to industry.<sup>11</sup> The CCP attempted to integrate this system with the regular school system by having it feed into universities, however, in the regularization drive of the mid-1950s, the CCP stopped giving worker-peasant students preferential treatment to ensure the ‘quality’ of tertiary institutions.<sup>12</sup>

The third ‘system’ of education prevalent in China at the time was *minban*. *Minban* schools were locally funded and run and scattered throughout the countryside. *Minban* schooling was very limited in scope by its informal nature, usually focusing on teaching basic literacy.<sup>13</sup> They were geared towards peasants who were not enrolled in the regular or specialized school streams. Though this system had played an important role in the Yan’an years as an effort to drastically increase the quantity of education, *minban* growth was curtailed during the FFYP, for the state was more preoccupied by industrialization and the qualitative rather than quantitative expansion of education.<sup>14</sup>

Julia Kwong writes:

“with the adoption of the First Five Year Plan, the government[‘s]...efforts went to extend such schools in the larger cities and industrial and mining districts than in the districts where industry was less developed. The urban population clearly had a greater advantage than the rural one.”<sup>15</sup>

This three-tiered system created a heavy urban and elite bias. Enrolment guidelines for secondary and technical (specialized) schools had stipulated that preference should be

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<sup>10</sup> Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*, 201.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Wang, “Minban Education.”

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Julia Kwong, *Chinese Education in Transition: Prelude to the Cultural Revolution* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1979), 70-1.

given to the children of revolutionary martyrs, peasants and workers. However, by 1953, this policy changed. In a drive to ensure quality, enrollment standards were set to rest on standardized academic examination scores rather than status or political history.<sup>16</sup> Academic and specialized schools remedied the problem of quality. However, the solution to students' growing demands to continue to higher education despite the limited opportunities available required a change in 'ideological outlook.'

To achieve this, the CCP required that labour become a mandatory part of academic education. The CCP hoped it would help shatter the aura of elitism that still engulfed academia and help narrow the urban/rural divide.<sup>17</sup> Urban students' self-perceived aura of superiority over peasants and workers would (hopefully) shatter once they were forced to labour alongside them. Thus, theoretically at least, the educated elite would come to respect and value the toil of the worker/peasant and the peasant would see him/herself as an equal to the urban student. Furthermore, the relocation of urban, educated youth would bring much needed talent to the countryside.<sup>18</sup>

At the heart of the urban/rural divide was the problem that urbanites enjoyed a much more comfortable lifestyle than their rural counterparts. Policies had to be brought in both to maximize agricultural output and "Reduce the gap between urban and rural life."<sup>19</sup> The policy of youth relocation, for example, was a direct response to the need to modernize the agricultural sector and close the urban/rural divide. In 1957, Mao framed this in ecological terms. He said: "80 percent of the materials needed by our country's light industry depend on agriculture, and light industry constitutes about 50 percent of the relative weight of our industry."<sup>20</sup> He drew the connection between good harvests and high industrial output. The FFYP brought rapid growth to the industrial sector, but left the agricultural sector lagging far

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<sup>16</sup> Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*, 209.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Sheringham, "Popularisation Policies in Chinese Education from the 1950s to the 1970s." *Comparative Education*, 20:1 (1984), 76, 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution: Educational Reforms and Their Impact on China's Rural Development, 1966-1976* (Grand Rapids: Garland, Incorporated, 2001), 25.

<sup>20</sup> Kwong, *Chinese Education in Transition*, 82.

behind. However, since industrial output was dependent upon good harvests, it was necessary to modernize the agricultural sector.<sup>21</sup> Flourishing industry in the cities was not sustainable without agricultural modernization, therefore, Mao set out to minimize the gap between urban and rural both to achieve social harmony and bolster the Chinese economy.

Thus, in 1958 came the Great Leap Forward (GLF). The GLF was an effort to reinvigorate rural (predominantly agricultural) production. Communes were established and quotas set to modernize the agricultural sector.<sup>22</sup> This was reflected in the schools, where the policy of regular/irregular educational streams was solidified. A new concept was developed for rural schooling: the agricultural middle school.<sup>23</sup> This was largely an extension of the specialized school concept. Agricultural middle schools were designed to meet the needs of rural localities. They were run by communes and rather than focusing solely on academics, agricultural middle schools focused on subjects such as politics, animal husbandry, fertilization, agriculture and labour, focusing on knowledge that would be applied to work in the communes.<sup>24</sup> However, they did provide some knowledge of academics, thereby educating rural youth while training them to better serve their communes. Agricultural middle schools therefore intended to educate rural students to better serve the agricultural sector of the Chinese economy.<sup>25</sup>

The GLF solidified Mao's 'walking on two legs' approach to education.<sup>26</sup> Urban education would be academic, focusing on the needs of the urban economy, and rural education would focus on the needs of the rural economic sector. The state, therefore, did not see this 'dual track' approach as a division of education into superior and inferior streams, but rather as two different, equal streams of education designed to cater to the specific needs of each sector of the economy.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 82, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 548-9.

<sup>23</sup> Sheringham, "Popularisation Policies in Chinese Education from the 1950s to the 1970s," 76.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Emily Hannum, "Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China, 1949-1990" *Comparative Education Review*, 43, 1 (May 1999), 197.

However, rather than help unify China's populace into a single class, the CCP's educational policies actually served to broaden the gap between urban and rural. Pepper quotes a teacher from the time period, Teacher Wang: "there were two things people did not like...one was agricultural middle schools; the second was *minban* schools. Peasants did not want to send their children to such schools because the education provided was inadequate."<sup>27</sup> The CCP had created a higher quality system in the urban, traditionally 'bourgeois' domain, and an inferior sector in the rural, 'proletarian' domain. The system was therefore interpreted as limiting for the rural population and 'liberating' for the traditional urban elite. Therefore, the age-old elitism in the educational sector persisted – "the existing educated elite – with its less than sympathetic orientation towards 'proletarian culture' – would remain essentially unchanged."<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, rural investment was curtailed after the disastrous consequences of the GLF policies came into the light.<sup>29</sup> Han writes, "the pre-Leap rural education policy was the product of the privileged, urban-based conservative policy makers, while the Great Leap educational policies represented the ascendancy of the radical group inside the CCP."<sup>30</sup> The GLF turned out to be a disaster. It amounted to a massive waste of resource, which, compounded by a series of natural disasters that drastically reduced agricultural output.<sup>31</sup> "These natural disasters affected not only agriculture but the output of light and heavy industry, which depended on agriculture for their supply of raw material."<sup>32</sup> These two factors, combined with the Great Famine drove the CCP to pursue less radical policies in the countryside.<sup>33</sup>

Despite official rhetoric in 1960 setting objectives of "extending university education to all persons...raising the standards of education...[and] speeding up the universalization of

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<sup>27</sup> Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*, 309.

<sup>28</sup> Pepper, "Post Mao Reforms in Chinese Education," 22.

<sup>29</sup> Hannum, "Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China, 1949-1990," *Comparative Education Review*, 43:1 (May 1999), 198.

<sup>30</sup> Dongping Han, *The Unknown Cultural Revolution*, 25.

<sup>31</sup> Kwong, *Chinese Education in Transition*, 107.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>33</sup> Hannum, "Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China," 198.

elementary school education,” there was an overall drop in enrollment in the immediate post-GLF years.<sup>34</sup> Kwong writes, “the greater rate of decline at the secondary and primary levels was the result of deliberate official policies to close down the work/study schools.”<sup>35</sup> Work/study schools had been implemented to help educate workers and peasants. Thus, they were the most severely affected in the immediate post-GLF period. Official policy further limited the educational opportunities of the worker/peasant, which therefore allowed the urban elite’s status to remain high and barred the worker/peasant from ascending.

The Cultural Revolution was largely born out of the tension between the egalitarian rhetoric of the Chinese state and the social hierarchies that were produced and had been maintained by the Chinese education system until that point. One Big Character Poster at Beijing University read: “now that the people of the whole country in their great love of the party and of Chairman Mao, and in their extreme hatred for the antisocialist gang, have risen up in the Cultural Revolution.”<sup>36</sup> The education system was one of the ‘bourgeois’ influences that had crept into China and had to be reformed. Education would have to be reformed into a truly egalitarian system, with no implicit priority given to the urban intellectual elite. However, the central problem that the CCP has been trying to grapple since it took power in 1949 remained. It simply did not have the resources to create a centralized, uniform and universal state-run school system. Ultimately, if demand for education continued to outstrip supply, the state would have to devise some sort of selection process that would allow some to get educated while denying the privilege to others.

The central objective of the Cultural Revolution was to “undercut differences between the peasantry and the remainder of the population.”<sup>37</sup> Beginning in 1966, and through 1968, schools were closed down, and the Red Guard pillaged anything that represented ‘bourgeois culture’ and the ‘four olds’ – old customs, habits, culture, and ideas.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Kwong, *Chinese Education in Transition*, 117-8.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>36</sup> Julia Kwong, *Cultural Revolution in China’s Schools: May 1966 – April 1969*, (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, Stanford University, 1998), 4.

<sup>37</sup> Hannum, “Political Change and the Urban-Rural Gap in Basic Education in China,” 199.

<sup>38</sup> Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 575.

They exhibited unflinching loyalty to Mao, desperate to purge any remaining class distinctions in China. Likewise, the policies invoked by Mao reflected this by attempting to eliminate distinctions between urban and rural, worker-peasant, mental/manual labour, and education. One of the first steps, therefore, was to equalize educational opportunities across both sectors of society.

In the 1966 guidelines for conduct of the Cultural Revolution, Mao wrote:

“in the great proletarian cultural revolution a most important task is to transform the old educational system and the old principles and methods of teaching...out schools being dominated by bourgeois intellectuals must be completely changed.”<sup>39</sup>

By September 1968, most schools had reopened and adapted to the post-Cultural Revolution socialist educational schema. First and foremost, official policy dictated decentralization of education and a catering to the needs of the locality.<sup>40</sup> Academic standards were reduced formidably, the content of university curricula was reduced by half, and policies of relocating urban youths to the countryside were resumed, with the declared goal of giving worker/peasant students an equal chance at the university level.<sup>41</sup> To realize this, the admission process changed. While previously, the subject of placement examinations had been exclusively academic, now academics were given less importance, because they were seen as a method of assessment that favoured a bourgeois elite and put the worker/peasant at a disadvantage. To ‘equalize’ educational opportunity, national entrance examinations for universities were abolished, so “the communes and brigades themselves would nominate the candidates.”<sup>42</sup> The importance of academics would be placed on the backburner, while more peasant/worker-friendly standards replaced them such as political history and labour.

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<sup>39</sup> R.F. Price, *Education in Communist China* (New York: Praeger, 1970), 2.

<sup>40</sup> Kwong, *Cultural Revolution in China's Schools*, 140.

<sup>41</sup> Pepper, “Post Mao Reforms in Chinese Education,” 26.

<sup>42</sup> Pepper, *Radicalism and Education Reform in 20th-Century China*, 457.

However, as can be seen from the data collected by Suzanne Pepper, though worker/peasant students did benefit from the new policy, the children of cadres were its main beneficiaries.<sup>43</sup>

The 'sorting' function of the modern school system remained; the only change was in the guidelines of the sorting. The state's inability to bridge urban and rural China made it impossible for a selective education system to run smoothly with socialist ideals. Urban youth were relocated to the countryside to complete their labour assignments. However, this policy, as it did during the GLF, failed. Suzanne Pepper perhaps identifies widespread urbanite disdain for the countryside best in her "Hong Kong Interviews" with individuals who lived through the Cultural Revolution. One interviewee stated "there is no culture [in the countryside] city youth don't know how to do these things [work in the countryside]...the peasants' world is selfish and small."<sup>44</sup> Another stated "the food is dull and so are the people and so is the work. Peasants are interested in nothing but their own work and in no one but themselves."<sup>45</sup> Still another said that "sent down youth cannot have good relations with the peasants because the peasants have no knowledge, no culture, no thought."<sup>46</sup> Despite efforts of integration, the urban and rural youth were not able to integrate, and the urban youth were not able to see the peasants as their equals.

An inherent failure of the Cultural Revolution was that it maintained the distinction between urban and rural, and the selective educational system was still seen as the only means out of the countryside. Rural dwellers were poorer and their lives were more difficult than their urban counterparts, therefore, there was a more or less uniform desire to get out of the countryside. Urban, state-salaried incomes were more generous, and the only way of obtaining an urban household registration was to become a Party Cadre, Pepper writes "moving into a cadre slot was a rare privilege...there was only one way: going to college of a specialized middle school."<sup>47</sup> Therefore, despite Mao's attempts to belittle mental work and raise the status of manual labour, key differences in the rural and urban sectors fostered the

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 459-61.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 394.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 395.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 456.

strong urban bias of the Chinese populace. The key to obtaining an urban registration, and therefore a road to a better life, was still through a selective educational system.

If being granted an urban household registration was still seen as a privilege, China could not be seen as an egalitarian state. Education was the means to ascension; a college education was the golden key to a better life in China. Still, this opportunity was not provided to all. Although the state did promote some measures to equalize Chinese society, its policies did not help stitch the tear in China's fabric between the rural and the urban. Had the state invested more in the countryside and equalized wages with urbanites, perhaps the chasm between mental and manual labour would have dwindled and a selective educational system may have generated less friction with the egalitarian and populist goals of the socialist state. However, wealth remained concentrated in the cities and the education system was formulated so that few had the opportunity to go. For some, the educational system still seemed like it was a wall. Those who were given the opportunity to scale it were granted a more comfortable lifestyle while those who were not were shackled to countryside. Therefore, the tension with the CCP's educational policies and its egalitarian goals was not one of educational content, or admission standards, but of class distinction and opportunity. As long as education remained the key to a better way of life, it would not be able to fulfill the socialist state's egalitarian promise.