

A Window into Chinese Education

Overview

The theme of education exists as a backdrop to all other areas of China's development presented in *China Rises*. In this section, Professors Liqing Tao, Margaret Berci, and Wayne He outline various aspects of the current issues in education and pose questions for further discussion and research.

The education section is divided into five areas. The first, **Historical Background: Expansion of Public Education** briefly addresses the various phases of China's public education and sets the context for the introduction of several topics chosen for discussion. The other areas are:

- **Democratization of Education in China**
- **Study Abroad**
- **Education as a Social Ladder**
- **Commercialization of Education**

Each topic treatment includes:

- a) An **overview** that serves as preamble to the introduction of
- b) **Issues for Exploration**, that open up the discussion on the topic and raise questions that may loom large
- c) **On the Horizon**. These are questions designed to jump-start further individual reflective thought and inquiry.
- d) **Reference links** extend the material and suggest a variety of perspectives on the issues.
- e) **Prompts to help processes of reflective inquiry** are offered to guide the exploration of the issues and questions raised in each topic.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND: Expansion of Public Education

There has always been a close connection between educational reforms and changes in social, economic and political milieu. In China, as in other countries, one political regime after another reformed education to suit their overt and covert aims. To guide inquiry, it is convenient to delineate the discussion of China's path to the present education system by identifying its changing characteristics through five distinct political phases.

1. **The Late Qing Dynasty**
2. **The Republic**
3. **The People's Republic of China – Period of Liberation and Recovery**
4. **The People's Republic of China – Period of The Cultural Revolution**
5. **Post-Mao China**

The Late Qing Dynasty (Pre - 1911)

The beginning of a system of formal education in China may be traced back as far as the Shang Dynasty (16---1045 BCE). [Link 20] From the onset, education was necessary to attain the coveted positions in civil service which were the key to wealth. The result was the perpetuation of a cultural/social cycle in which the elite were the educated and the educated were the elite. Prior to the Imperial Examination system, most appointments to civil service were based on recommendations from aristocrats and existing officials. By 115 CE, in an attempt to remove the patronage system, the government established a curriculum for the so-called First Generation of examination takers. [Link 16] Education under this Imperial Examination system however remained elitist and for the most part existed only to train government officials.

The set curriculum focused on the Six Arts: music, archery, horsemanship, writing arithmetic, history and knowledge of the public and private life rituals and ceremonies. The content was gradually expanded to cover the Five Studies: military strategy, civil law, revenue and taxation, agriculture and geography; in addition to a combination of works that defined the philosophy of Confucianism. The teachings of Confucius, outlined both personal conduct as well as societal and government goals, and were contained in the Four Books: *Analects of Confucius*, *Mencius*, *The Great Learning*, *The Doctrine of the Mean*, and the Five Classics: *The Book of Odes*, *The Book of Documents*, *The Book of Rites*, *The Book of Changes*, *The Spring and Autumn Annals*. [Link 10]

Confucianism is a form of Humanism; that is, his writings place man at the center of things, and concentrate on human issues. The pedagogical focus is on educating people in the belief, values and practices that govern life within the family and between family and state. Confucianism advocates a strong attachment to one's extended family while legitimating a subservient relationship of subjects to monarchs. [Link 17, 19]

The government administered the various levels of these imperial or civil service examinations that came to dominate education. For over two thousand years education operated under a system in which the elite class was supported by a large illiterate base. Used for the selection of public officials, the examination system was not a neutral democratic method of education but a political mechanism for legitimating and reproducing the relations of knowledge and power between society's elite and the monarch's subjects. Although during and before the Ming dynasty certain people, called "mean people" could not take the exam, by the early Qing period the law was changed to make it possible for any male adult in China could become a high-ranking government official by passing the examinations. In reality, most of the candidates came from the small, wealthy land-owning gentry, since the process of studying for the examination was time-consuming and costly. [Link 29]

There were different levels of examinations, each with specific content, requiring various methods of preparation and leading to distinct *degree* types and social functions. Oddly, these Chinese Imperial examinations are considered to be the first standardized tests based on *merit*. The exams lasted between 24 to 72 hours and consisted of essay questions that tested the individual's understanding of the Confucius doctrine. To obtain objectivity in evaluation, candidates were identified by number rather than by name; and in order to further ensure

anonymity, examination answers were rewritten by a third person before being evaluated. [Link 10] Preparations for these tests were conducted in private institutions set up exclusively for the purpose of examination preparation with their sole goal to “teach to the test”. The knowledge base that served as curriculum in these schools was considered to be superior in the world and good pedagogy for the most part was seen to be simply a matter of transferring knowledge

The Chinese reevaluated this belief in social and intellectual superiority after their defeat in the Opium War (1840-1842), and the cessation of Hong Kong to Great Britain. The more liberal minded officials began to recognize the need to look to western influence in education, especially in the areas of science and technology and also saw it as an opportunity for a new approach to education. Originally these modernizers adopted the Japanese patterns of schooling, since that model demonstrated success in combining Western knowledge structures with the preservation of Eastern social and moral values. However, the majority of the Chinese upper class was suspicious of these reforms and feared that they were endangering the national spirit.

The motto became “Chinese learning for the foundation; Western learning for practical use”. Confucian texts would continue to be the foundation and would be balanced with Western technology. The system of civil service examinations remained the goal of the education system until, it too, was re-evaluated in the wake of the 1895 the Sino-Japanese War. In 1905 the Qing Dynasty court, mainly in an effort to reduce the illiteracy rate, dismantled the civil service examination system and issued a series of reforms that organized education into a modern system of primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education.

The Republic (1911-1949)

In 1911, the bourgeois revolution overthrew the Qing Dynasty and set the stage for the establishment of a Republican form of government by Dr. Sun Yat-sen. In many respects, the revolution that made the change possible was a product of the ideals of Western democracy. In the area of education, the Nationalist reformers tended to favor the Western European model of centralized state control over all levels of the education system. The aim of education also shifted, from the emphasis on the reproduction of a scholar class to the desire to bring about needed social change while preserving the cultural/social unity.

The new Republic’s first Minister of Education, Cai Yuanpei [Link 4] proposed a system that advocated the unity of five types of education: military/citizenship, utilitarian, moral, world view, and aesthetic. He was greatly attracted to the pragmatic education theory of John Dewey, with its emphasis on experimental inquiry. He agreed with Dewey that the aims of education were to foster intelligence of mind, personal traits that contribute to culture and society, democratic mobility and educational growth. In order to guard against the use and abuse of education by those interested in using scientific knowledge for political power and economic profit, void of a national morality, Cai Yuanpei planned to place the responsibility for administrating the education system into the hands of independent educators who were not influenced by state, party or church.

Cai Yuanpei’s plan [Link 4] consisted of creating a university district system in which each district would have a university that would supervise all levels of district schooling and

within that university, educational affairs would rest with a committee organized by that university's professors. This plan was not realized because it was in direct conflict with the Nationalist's goal to centralize all levels of the education system.

Various systems of education were tried and abandoned and eventually a system closely modeled after that of the United States was introduced. [Link 21, 23] Reform focused on constructing a system that could retain the Chinese identity, yet also have the flexibility to sustain the technological needs of the country that included the rural masses. In 1921, amid the chaos of the competitions for power between the warlords, the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party was proclaimed. Its birth was aided by the momentum of the 1919 May Fourth Movement which signified a period of intellectual discussion concerning the place of traditional Chinese culture, modern science and Western style democracy, [Link 4] and. Mao Zedong, the leader of the newly formed Communist Party, had specific ideas about the structure of the education system. In 1921 he and his supporters established the Hunan-Self-Study University whose aim was to offer higher education to those who could otherwise not afford it. [Link 22] This experiment in accessible education, however, was put on hold in 1937 as a result of the Japanese invasion when most debates about reforms of the education system were suspended.

The People's Republic of China – Period of Liberation and Recovery (1949-1966)

At the end of the Chinese civil war in 1949, only a few Chinese were attending school or even had basic literacy skills. Mao Zedong understood the political importance of control over education, and as part of its development strategy, the Communist Party returned to its pre-civil war aim to improve access to education for all. During the period of the national economic recovery (1949-1952), the new government consciously protected the rights of the poor, and modestly encouraged locals and ordinary people to establish new schools, including private, public, and collective. Although the government did turn its attention to ensure the rapid recovering, stabilizing, adjusting and reorienting of the old primary schools, the greater part of its educational energy was placed on a policy of restructuring higher education. In the early days of Communism, to ensure rapid reshaping of the whole education system, the government adopted Soviet education patterns with its heavy emphasis on engineering programs and production labor. [Link 27, 28, 30] Although the growth of the enrollment rate was very quick, the Soviet model did not address the problem of mass illiteracy.

Therefore, between the years 1953-1955, a new policy, stressing the improvement of educational quality rather than quantity, was adopted. Private and collective schools (called "people run schools") were still allowed to open but with more limitations. Enrollment again increased. In 1956 the main policy of the Ministry of Education once again changed in the effort to accelerate development. Private schools were nationalized, education was expanded at all levels and was heavily subsidized, and indeed the growth in enrollment rate again accelerated. [Link 27] The Confucian texts were abandoned and the most important aspects of the curriculum became Mao's works and other official Communist documents. [Link 50] Intellectuals came under strict government control and were encouraged to turn their technical expertise to rebuilding the country. [Link 30] Through redistributive educational policies, the "three great inequalities" – inter-regional, rural-urban and intra-work unit- were consistently addressed

In 1957 the Chinese Communist party, feeling confident in their progress, launched the *Hundred Flowers Campaign* asking for criticism under the classical *double hundred* slogan *Let a hundred flowers bloom*, (referring to the arts) and *Let the hundred schools of thought contend* (referring to scientific development). When the *Campaign* resulted in the widespread criticism of the party itself, it was quietly abandoned and those who answered the Party's invitation to offer criticism and alternate solutions were silenced. [Link 40]

The *Great Leap Forward* movement (1958-1960) and the *Socialist Educational Movement* (1962-1965) further sought to end elitism by narrowing the social and cultural gaps between workers and peasants and between urban and rural populations. The curriculum and the educational goals mirrored this goal and concentrated on providing some form of higher education for all. The number of comprehensive universities diminished while the number of specialized colleges (polytechnic universities, teacher-training institutions) increased. It was during this time that institutions of various levels of teacher education were created for pre-service and in-service teachers with programs organized for the purpose of transforming "old" teachers into "new" by having them adopt socialist ideas. [Link 47]

With the *Sino-Soviet split* in 1960, the borrowed Soviet model was no longer held as the paradigm, and the government returned to creating curricula that demonstrated a balance between Confucian and Western-style education. The education system changed into a two-track form that Mao saw as part of his "*walking on two legs*" (*liangtiaotui zoulu*) strategy: regular, university, college and college preparatory schooling representing one of the "legs"; the vocational and work-study schooling, the other. Many saw this two legged form as a return to a system that would produce a hierarchy of elite, with the masses settling for something less rigorous in content and quality. [Link 27]

People's Republic of China –Period of The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)

The two tiered system of education continued to flourish until 1966. Mao believing that his party was losing the revolutionary fervor and was creating a privileged elite that was a threat to the socialist regime. He accused the party of capitalist tendencies, bureaucratism, elitism, and inefficiency. By calling on the young people to actively revive the revolutionary spirit, he launched a ten-year period called "The Cultural Revolution".

Students formed "Red Guards" and "revolutionary rebels" and went out among the populous to destroy the old culture, the old ideology, the old customs, and the old habits. Education, having a considerable impact on social and economic development, became the first targets of attack and Mao declared that education should be revolutionized. [Link 36]

At the onset of the Cultural Revolution schools were closed so that teachers and students could focus all their energy on the revolution. Decisions about education *per se* moved from the control of the Ministry of Education intellectuals to various subcommittees of the Communist Party Central Committee made up of local workers soldiers, peasants and politically correct teachers. The revolution in education featured a system in which:

- 1) the curriculum replaced theory with concepts related to work;
- 2) meritocracy and academic achievement was not recognized [Link 24] ;
- 3) the length of pre-post secondary schooling was cut from 12 to 10 years;

- 4) study in the classroom was combined with field work (five months in classroom, one month each in factory, farm and army);
- 5) courses in history, geography or literature were eliminated;
- 6) graduates were given jobs in factories and farms;
- 7) all entrance examinations were abolished;
- 8) students were selected to pursue post secondary education on basis of *virtue*; students from families of workers, peasants or soldiers were deemed to be the most *virtuous*.
- 9) colleges were removed from the leadership of the intellectuals. [Link 41, 35]

In effect the reforms of the Cultural Revolution ” brought about the “de-schooling” of the society by destroying the whole structure of the education system. The teachers were demoralized and came under political suspicion; curricula was non-existent or watered-down, and sound teaching strategies were replaced with group-discussion, non-competitive problem-solving and open-book tests; all without quality control.[Link 38] The impact of the reforms was equally devastating on the economy and caused the regime to end the Cultural Revolution a decade after it began. Since Mao’s death the decade has been called “the ten years of turmoil”.

Post-Mao China (1976 – present)

With the death of Mao (1976), the pendulum began to swing back and Chinese education system was deemed to be a major factor in the advancement of economic modernization. Science and technology became an important focus of educational policy. Since the rise to power of Deng Xiaoping in 1978 a number of reforms have been introduced. [Link 27] The shift toward a socialist market economy necessitated not only an *adequately trained* work force to support economic development, but a highly educated one. The transformation of the school system became a national priority. Quality of education was again preferred over the quantity, and once again, the curricula and pedagogy took to borrowing from abroad for advanced training in the scientific fields. In addition the great revival in both Chinese and Western literature and arts in the late 1970’s and 1980’s, has had an effect on the curricula of the public school.

The policy of “walking on two legs” and “allowing social and private forces to operate (people run) schools” was recovered. Private schools which were strictly prohibited during the Cultural Revolution were permitted to open [Link 18, 12, 31, 32] and technical schools that were closed were also re-opened. Tracking was again sanctioned in the lower schools, and academic competition returned (in 1978, over 57,200 college graduates competed for 10,000 spots in graduate schools). Time spent in school increased and higher education, virtually dismantled under the Cultural Revolution, was rebuilt and expanded. [Link 14, 15]

In May 1985, the National Conference on Education officially identified a number of areas destined for reform. These reforms were designed

- to produce “more able people”; [Link 53]
- to improve secondary education;
- to develop vocational and technical education;
- to reform the graduate-assignment system of institutions of higher education [Link13, 24]
- to expand their management and decision-making powers;

- to give administrators the necessary encouragement and authority to ensure smooth progress in educational reform;
- to make the localities responsible for developing basic education and systematically implement the 1986 Law on Nine-Year Compulsory Education.

Primary education became free and compulsory. The government introduced a law that made it illegal for any organization or individual to employ youths before they completed their nine years of schooling. The same law also authorized students whose families had financial difficulties to receive subsidies. [Link 5, 27, 34]

In 1985, The Ministry of Education was abolished and the State Education Commission was established. The new Commission had greater status than the old Ministry had and is in charge of all educational organizations except military ones. The reform decentralized much of the power and once again assigned to local authorities, the right and the duty to run and financially support primary education. China however lacks an efficient taxation system, and the central government has limited resources, and funding for the education system is not as high on the list of priorities as economic investment.

Elitism has also once again become an issue. More than 80 percent of the school age population live in the countryside and in the suburbs. In order to send their children to a good school, *the back door connection*, a Chinese tradition, has reappeared and the rapid increase in the cost of tuition and of textbooks have also made it difficult for most families to afford. [Link 17]. In addition, the households became the main unit of production following the dismantling of the collectives, and peasants found that their children are more useful working in the field than going to school. These children have become the direct victims of the new elitism. Consequently the number of illiterate youths has increased and the drop-out rate mirrors the rate of overall social dissatisfaction.

In the area of teacher education, development was characterized by progress in preparing a large number of qualified teachers and passing legislation to improve teacher education. A national system of teacher qualification regulations was set up in 2001 to certify qualified teachers. According to new regulations only those with teaching certificates may teach. In 1993, A Teachers' Law was passed to protect their legal rights; however, low teacher wages still presents a problem for teacher retention. [Link 5, 43, 44, 45, 46]

To help remedy the inequalities, on December 27, 2005 the government announced that China will spend 218 billion yuan (27.25 billion U.S. dollars) in the next five years to help improve rural education. In addition, for two years China will exempt all the education tuitions and fees for students who are in any part of the nine year compulsory education period and will provide textbooks and subsidies for students from needy families. At the same time, the fund will ensure that wages of rural teachers will be paid.

Reference Links:

- Link 1: China Education and Research Network brief introduction to the system/policies and laws/news and events/basic education/higher education/distance education/educational documents/international cooperation.
<http://www.edu.cn/HomePage/english/education/index/.shtml>
- Link 2: China Today
<http://www.chinatoday.com.cn/English?english/english-2/jiaoyu.htm>
- Link 3: China Unique: Educational Resources and Information. Education Resources and information site designed to provide students of any age the high level information needed in their studies and projects. Contains quick facts, and links.
<http://chinaunique.com/educate/>
- Link 4: Chinese Culture Club: A discussion on various aspects of Chinese culture and history including education:
<http://www.chinesecultureclub.org/cultureinfor/content.php?inoid=35>
- Link 5: Chinese Embassy in Nepal (various topics related to Education in China)
<http://www.chinaembassy.org.np/education/index.htm>
- Link 6: Library of Congress Country Studies: China
[http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+cn0102\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+cn0102))
see site from field numbered +cn 0102 though +cn0126
- Link 7: Modern Chinese Literature and Cultural Resource Center. Link to extensive education bibliography. <http://mclc.osu.edu/rc/edu.htm>
- Link 8: No Borders No Limits: Teaching
<http://nobordersnolimits.typepad.com/weblog/teaching/index.html>
- Link 9: Questia: Full text books and articles on education in China.
<http://www.questia.com/library/education/education-in-different-countries-and-states/education-in-China>
- Link10: Wikipedia offers on-line encyclopedic information on topics such as: Imperial Examinations, Chinese Classic Texts, Education in the People's Republic of China, Education in China. <http://en.wikipedia.org>
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- Link 20: Hu, C. T. (1984). The historical background: Examinations and controls in pre-modern China. Comparative Education, 20(1), 7-26. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No EJ 300192)
- Link21: Yuan Shih-kai's Last Words on Chinese Reform; China's Late President, Shortly Before His Death, Wrote That American Education Methods Were Exerting Great Influence By Yuan Shih-kai, Late President of China, New York Times (1857-Current file). New York, N.Y.: Jun 18, 1916. p. SM6 (1 page)
- Link22: EXPERTS INVESTIGATE EDUCATION IN CHINA; International Group Will Make Recommendations to the League of Nations. Special Correspondence *The New York Times*. New York Times (1857-Current file). New York, N.Y.: Nov 1, 1931. p. 56 (1 page)
- Link 23: EDUCATION REPORT ON CHINA ASSAILED; Dr. Duggan Attacks League Mission's View That Schools There Are Too American. HOLDS THEM BEST SUITED

Scientific and Technical Teaching More Valuable Than “Traditionalism,” He Declares.
New York Times (1857-Current file). New York, N.Y. Jan 9, 1933, p.20 (1 page)

- Link 24: Andreas, Joel (2004). Leveling the little pagoda: The impact of college examinations, and their elimination, on rural education in China. Comparative Education Review, 48 (1), 1-48. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No EJ 701 445)
- Link 25: Bergen, T. J. (1990). The influence of Mao Tse-Tung on contemporary Chinese education. Journal of Research and Development in Education, 24(1), 34-43.
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