

# Profile of the Educational System of the People's Republic of China

by Michael Holcomb

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The People's Republic of China now ranks a close second behind Taiwan among countries sending the greatest number of students to the United States. According to the upcoming edition of Open Doors, more than 25,000 Chinese students were enrolled in 1987. United States admission officers in the 1980's have come to a keener appreciation of issues of magnitude arising from Chinese educational policies and development.

After more than a decade of emphasis on family planning and a steady decline in the birth rate, China's population increased in 1986 to an estimated 1.06 billion. Three million more babies were born than was forecast. If these or even higher rates become a trend, greater pressures will be placed on an education system which the government has sought to reform and modernize since the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976.

As testimony to the link between educational reform and economic development, the Ministry of Education was upgraded in 1985 and renamed the State Education Commission (SEDC), headed by a Vice Premier. It is the central national agency responsible for setting policy, formulating regulations and allocating resources for all educational

institutions. In order to make the best use of the limited resources available, since the end of the Cultural Revolution certain educational institutions at all levels, from kindergarten to post-graduate, have been designated as "key" schools--the academically strongest institutions which are regarded as vital to the campaign of modernization and educational reform. "Key" schools, concentrated principally in urban areas, have received priority in the allocation of funds, faculty, and resources. Admission to them is most competitive, and their graduates are among the best the country offers.

## Primary and Lower Secondary Education

Officially, primary education is compulsory for five years in some rural areas, and six years in other rural areas and all urban areas. Enforcement and patterns of enrollment vary, however, and fewer than 35% of China's counties reach this goal. In 1987, 830,000 schools enrolled almost 134 million children. The goal of the SEDC is to nationalize the requirement of six years of primary education and three years of lower secondary education by 1990 for China's major cities and heavily populated coastal areas. For central China the target date is 1995, and unspecified for the most rural and remote areas.

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sized the disparity between goals and their realization. Patterns of attendance vary by region (higher in urban areas) and gender (more boys than girls attend school). Educational attrition is recognized as a common problem. The adage is "9-6-3-": for every 9 students who enter primary school, 6 complete it, and 3 of those advance to secondary school.

### Secondary Education

Official sources report greater numbers of students advancing up the educational ladder. As of 1985, there were 93,200 junior and senior high schools with a total enrollment of more than 47 million students. Approximately 70% of primary school graduates continued on to junior high school, and 46% from junior high school to senior high school.

Junior high schools offer three year programs. Senior high schools offer two year, or in urban areas, three year programs. Due to regional and urban-rural variations, high school graduates will have had 10 or 12 years of school. All graduates are eligible to sit for the National Entrance Examination for university admission. The curriculum of the traditional academic track emphasizes Chinese language, mathematics, foreign languages, physics, chemistry and history.

More than two thirds of the 3.5 million secondary school teachers and administrators work at vocational schools, a reflection of the government's determination to reinvest in the development of vocational and technical education. Vocational-technical secondary schools account for almost six million students. Most of these schools are at the senior secondary level. They do not prepare students for higher education. Vocational courses have been added to the curricula of more traditional schools.

There are three types of senior secondary vocational-technical schools:

1. Secondary specialized, or technical, schools (three year programs) are operated and financed by central technical ministries, and have an enrollment of 1.7 million in 4,000 schools. Many offer four or five year programs because they enroll junior secondary students as well. Typically, narrow specialties are offered, which lead

to limited placement options in such technologies as engineering, forestry, health sciences and sports.

2. Skilled worker schools (two to three year programs) are administered by the Ministry of Labor and Personnel and enroll about one million students. These are managed by provincial or local industrial bureaus with joint resources from business enterprises. Their purpose is to train workers skilled in modern production techniques in specialized trades such as light and textile industries, coal mining, power generation and construction engineering. Courses of study include internships, and their graduates are guaranteed employment.

3. Secondary agricultural-vocational schools (two to three years) have an enrollment of almost 2.5 million students in 8,000 institutions. The government has undertaken major efforts to revitalize these schools, many of which have been converted from general academic schools.

### Tertiary Education

In 1986, after a decade of rapid expansion, 1,054 institutions of higher education enrolled 1.87 million students, including 110,000 graduate students. In addition, China enrolls nearly two million students in 1,200 schools of adult learning. Regional and national manpower needs determine overall enrollments in subject areas. The greatest number of students are concentrated in engineering and in the natural sciences.

Universities may be controlled by Ministries other than the State Education Commission: i.e., the Ministry of Culture, the Academy of Sciences, local departments of education, or other Ministries responsible for specific industries. The system of "key" institutions receiving priority in the allocation of resources incorporates some 100 institutions. Current educational reforms, aimed at greater decentralization in academic governance, have placed less emphasis on "key" institutions. In spite of the changes, those designated as "key" are still the most prestigious institutions in China.

Admission to colleges, institutes and universities is largely determined by performance on the National Entrance

Examination, administered each July throughout China. In recent years, approximately 1.6 million senior secondary school graduates have taken the examination annually, with an admission rate of about 25%. Subject areas covered on the examination include politics, mathematics, Chinese language and literature, and foreign languages. Questions in physics, chemistry and biology are added for students in the sciences; and in history and geography for students in the humanities. Normally, the maximum attainable score is 500. Most institutions require a score of 300 for admission, although the more selective "key" schools require a minimum of 380. Because of regional differences and admission quotas, these minimum acceptable scores can vary.

Students may list preferences for five universities, plus two specialized institutes. Students are generally assigned to an institution of their choice on the basis of their scores. In at least one major metropolitan area, Shanghai, less reliance is being placed on test scores alone, with high school records and recommendations also influencing admission decisions.

#### **Undergraduate Education**

Chinese institutions follow an academic calendar of 10 months, from September to July. Most university students take five courses per year, each taught 50 minutes per day, five days a week. The SEDC oversees the design and implementation of curricula for all programs. There are three categories of courses: political, general and major subject. Political courses constitute 10 to 15% of course hours. The national curriculum for foreign languages and physical education occupies an equal amount, with major subject courses consuming the remaining 70 to 80%. Elective or non-prescribed courses are few.

Bachelor's degrees were first awarded in 1982 to those completing four-year degree programs (five years for medicine and dentistry). During the period of the Cultural Revolution, which ended in 1977, many colleges and universities were closed. Those which operated offered three- or four-year courses of study

leading to a diploma. Many students, however, studied during this period of time without being awarded any kind of formal credential.

Teacher training is provided at normal colleges in programs varying in length from two to four years.

#### **Graduate Education**

Master's degree programs were first introduced in 1978, and doctoral programs in 1982. Graduate enrollment has continued to expand rapidly and at a rate faster than that of undergraduate enrollment. Admission is based on the Graduate Entrance Examination, and on a university examination in two subjects pertinent to the field of study.

Master's degrees require two to three years of study, plus a research project or thesis. Doctoral degrees require three years of study beyond the master's and a thesis.

#### **Adult Education**

In 1979, China established Radio and Television Universities in an effort to increase productivity and provide opportunities for higher education to as many citizens as possible. There are now more than 30 T.V. universities, with 600 branch institutes and 1,100 county groups serving more than 2 million people in every province. They offer both individual courses and three-year diploma programs in a wide variety of fields. Admission is based upon an entrance examination given once each term by each university. Examinations are given for each subject. T.V. universities do not prepare students for regular university entrance, nor are their diplomas regarded as equivalent to university issued diplomas or degrees. However, coursework from these programs is generally recognized by employers.

#### **Higher Vocational and Technical Education**

Post-secondary vocational-technical education is offered at two types of institutions. Vocational-technical colleges admit students with two years of regular senior secondary school. They offer three year terminal diploma programs. "Polytechnics" admit students from regular three year senior secondary

schools. Degree equivalence between the two is not an issue in China as graduates from these institutions are most likely to find employment in their home regions.

#### Grading System and Records

A single grading scale is used in all Chinese institutions, typically showing numerical or letter grades:

90 - 100%	A	(Excellent)
80 - 89%	B	(Good)
70 - 79%	C	(Fair)
60 - 69%	D	(Pass)
0 - 59	E	(Fail)

In courses without a final examination, pass/fail indicators are used. These are usually laboratory, continuing courses or physical education. Many students receive grades in the upper range of the scale, which may be a result of the keen competition for admission combined with high motivation for success.

Academic records are generally available for work done since 1977, and in some instances, even from the decade of the Cultural Revolution. These records may be provided by the work unit (employer) with which the applicant is affiliated, original institution of attendance, or the current institution of graduate enrollment. Complete records should be requested in the original Chinese as well as in translation. Admission officers should be aware of the common practice of individual applicants translating their own documents. Certified or verifiable translations should be obtained showing dates of attendance and numeric grades. Official records are verified by a red stamp citing the name of the institution in Chinese characters, which can be compared against those given in the volume by Fingar and in China Update #5 by Haas and Reed, cited in the bibliography.

Scores from the Chinese National Entrance Examination and the Graduate Entrance Examination may also be requested and are useful in providing a more complete academic profile.

#### U.S. Standardized Tests

In 1988-1989, the GMAT, GRE, and TOEFL/TSE are given at 36 sites in 16 Chinese cities under the auspices of the China International Examinations Coordination Bureau (CIECB). Foreign

currency restriction is the chief obstacle which prevents privately sponsored students from presenting test scores.

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(Editor's Note: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of World Education Services, Inc..)

# Publications

Editor's Note: The publications described below are available from their respective publishers; publications are not available from World Education Services, Inc.)

The American University: A World Guide, Gregory A. Barnes. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1984. 196 pp. U.S. \$14.95. (Available from ISI Press, 3501 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104.)

This is a guide to aspects of American university education which may be new or confusing to those educated in other countries. It also gives a concise history and philosophy of American higher education and attempts to explain the structure of the university in this country. The glossary gives short definitions of terms such as credit, department, withdrawal, grade-point average and others peculiar to American education. Case studies illustrate typical classroom situations and typical students. All areas of university life are covered from classes to sororities to football. This text can be recommended to international students as an introduction to what to expect of higher education in the United States and Americans who have not made a study of higher education will find it an interesting overview of a system that they have all been in, but knew very little about.

American Higher Education: An International Perspective, V.R. Cardozier. Aldershot (England) and Vermont (U.S.A.): Gower Publishing Company, 1987. 209 pp. (Available from: Avebury, Gower Publishing Company Limited, Gower House, Croft Road, Aldershot, Hants GU11 3HR, England or Gower Publishing Company, Old Post Road, Brookfield, VT 05036.)

This text is a thorough study of higher education in the United States, designed for non-Americans and for Americans who have not made a study of higher education. It includes a myriad of applicable statistics, comprehensive information on history, structure and purpose and sections on everything from funding to bogus degrees. A detailed study, this volume would be helpful to anyone needing information on higher education in the United States.

International Review of Education, edited by the Unesco Institute for Education, Hamburg. Published four times a year. Subscription rates: U.S. \$73.50 per year for institutions, U.S. \$26.50 per year for individuals. (Available from Kluwer Academic Publishers, C/O Kluwer Boston Inc., P.O. Box 358, Accord Station, Hingham, MA 02018 or Kluwer Academic Publishers, Humanities and Social Sciences Division, P.O. Box 17, 3300 AA Dordrecht, The Netherlands.)

This journal publishes articles in the field of education theory and practice and includes information on innovations, research projects and trends in education. The articles may be in English, French or German. The current issue (Vol. 34, No. 2, 1988) is a special issue devoted to vocational education and includes articles dealing with the links between vocational and general education, the economics of vocational and technical education and vocational education in the People's Republic of China.

Educational Exchange, Joy Reid, ed. Yarmouth, Maine: Intercultural Press Inc., 1988. 214 pp. U.S. \$19.95. (Available from: Intercultural Press Inc., P.O. Box 768, Yarmouth, ME 04096.)

This book is a series of essays and articles dealing with the professional in the field of educational exchange. There are three main sections: "Context of Educational Exchange," "Foundations of Knowledge," and "Student Services and Programming," with detailed articles in each section.

Governmental and Institutional Policies on Foreign Students: Analysis, Evaluation and Bibliography, Y. G-M. Lulat, Philip G. Altbach, David Kelly. Special Studies in Comparative Education, Number Sixteen: Comparative Education Center, Faculty of Educational Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo, in cooperation with the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, 1986. 114 pp. (Available from: Publications Division, Comparative Education Center, 428 Baldy Hall, S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo, Amherst, NY 14260.)

This study describes and evaluates policy issues concerning international students as developed by governments and institutions. It includes an extensive bibliography which lists policy-related texts from around the world.

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## Publications continued

Educational Reform and Development in China, compiled by Wu Wei, edited and translated by Chen Shu Ching, Shu Hang-li, and Wu Yen-bo. Special Studies in Comparative Education, Number Nineteen, Comparative Education Center, Faculty of Educational Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo, in cooperation with the Central Institute of Educational Research, Beijing, 1987. 65 pp. (Available from: Publications Division, Comparative Education Center, 428 Baldy Hall, S.U.N.Y. at Buffalo, Amherst, NY 14260.)

A collection of articles on contemporary educational developments in the People's Republic of China, this publication deals with educational progress and problems faced in China today. The articles were written by various professionals in China's educational system.

The Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning, Report of a CNAA Development Fund Project conducted at the Learning From Experience Trust. CNAA Development Services Publication 17. London: Council for National Academic Awards, 1988. (Available from: Council for National Academic Awards, 344-354 Gray's Inn Road, London WC1X 8BP, England.)

This report focuses on the techniques of assessing prior experience for credit or exemption at the post-secondary level used in the APEL (Assessment of Prior Experiential Learning) project in Britain. A comprehensive look at how the project was set up and the criteria for granting credit, the report is valuable in two respects. It gives a detailed look at the current methods of external credit assessment at some specific schools in England and it can serve as a wealth of ideas for any school embarking on the task of creating an assessment program for life experience credits.