



Reflections on Education in China

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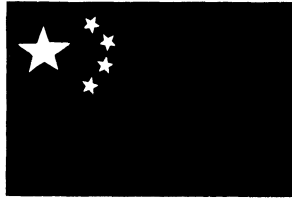
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Reflections on Education in China

by Michael W. Kirst

A vest-pocket update on Chinese schooling.

I spent 16 days in China in late April and May of 1978, about six months later than Ralph Tyler, whose observations were reported in the September *Kappan*. Chinese policy is changing rapidly, and I believe my comments update his interesting conclusions.

My group, which included an expert on Chinese education and a China-born researcher, visited schools, universities, governmental institutions, homes, factories, and a variety of cultural areas of Chinese life. Our visit included the following cities: Peking, Nanking, Shanghai, Hangchow, and Canton. We also visited a rural area outside of Nanking and stayed in a small city called Yangchow.

We found that the leading educational issue was the tension between equality and merit. The new leadership in China was very clear on what they wanted in terms of the general direction — to move toward higher educational efficiency, excellence, and merit. Under the old system, the emphasis in education was on imbuing students with the ideals of Maoist thought and distributing educational opportunity to the lower classes — peasants and workers. Many of the former ideals are still present — political support, morality, and the glorification of work continue — but we observed drastic changes taking place. In the trade-off between equality and efficiency in education, the people advocating technical and scientific efficiency are clearly in the power positions. Examples of changed attitudes are:

1. *The institution of entrance exams at all levels of education.* In Peking alone, 160,000 were tested for 6,000 spots in universities. In fact, until the exams were formulated no one was admitted last year

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as a freshman to any Chinese university. There are two separate national university exams — science/engineering and liberal arts — and Chinese officials are contemplating exams for admission to some junior and senior high schools.

2. *The downplaying of work in the curriculum for students who show unusual promise in scientific/technical or other areas.* Work is now restricted to two weeks during the summer (instead of several months) for such students, and there is no expectation that bright science students will be sent down to the countryside after high school for three to four years. The new university admissions policy says high school graduates must merely have a “good sense of manual labor.”

3. *Discrimination against sons and daughters of former landlords and capitalists has been ended.* Essentially, the Chinese are looking for their best students, regardless of their backgrounds, for postsecondary education.

4. *Emphasis on building up demonstration schools.* We found that these key schools were to have increased resources and higher per-pupil expenditures than other schools. This policy favors urban areas — a complete reversal of the Gang of Four’s peasant-rural priority — since students who attend key schools have a much higher chance of moving on to higher education than do students in rural schools.

5. *Centralization of education in order to prescribe quality standards at all levels.*

6. *The establishment of English as a required subject for nearly all students and the reliance on English as the key foreign language.* English is taught in the early primary grades. This would appear to orient the Chinese toward the Western world and away from the Soviet-backed bloc. The reason for this emphasis on English is the Chinese belief that the most

important technological documents are written in English.

7. *Strict standards for promotion, not too dissimilar from our own proficiency or competency standards.* In the past, some teachers have been intimidated, and promotion was often based on the students’ social awareness rather than academic achievement. In a particularly significant shift from Communist ideology, some elementary students are now assigned to advanced, intermediate, and slow classes. Tracking has now been implemented on a trial basis, but already the Chinese are debating the same issues we are in the United States concerning ability grouping.

8. *A strong reemphasis on discipline and overt competition.*

9. *Emphasis in higher education on research and quality of experimentation in considering teachers for promotion.* As we left, a large number of professors were being promoted at major universities in recognition of their prior scientific achievements. In the recent past, such scientific achievements have been played down as indicating a lack of communistic orientation. Professors who spent long periods working in rural communes were considered exemplary.

The new minister of education is oriented toward science and technology. In essence, the Chinese have decided that they cannot increase their gross national product — and thereby improve the status of their workers — unless they change their existing economic and incentive system. They must move toward higher employee motivation as well as more labor-saving and technologically based production methods.

All of these educational changes are justified as following the “revolutionary line of Chairman Mao” and obliterating

the negative influences of the Gang of Four. However, as several observers told us, the Gang of Four really had a fifth member, and it was Chairman Mao. For example, it is hard to find in Mao's writings any emphasis on the education of gifted children. Indeed, Mao's concern that Communist concepts become completely integrated into the superstructure of thought and ideas in China would seem to be contrary to the present focus of singling out science students and key schools for receiving extraordinary academic programs.

We found it interesting that the Chinese have a strong interest in American education methods, particularly the new curriculum and teaching approaches developed by the National Science Foundation. They were most curious about the new math, new chemistry, new biology, and so on. We observed many Chinese classes, and the didactic method still held sway, as Ralph Tyler has noted in this journal. The Chinese were very much interested in discovery methodology, particularly for their scientists. They are translating the NSF curriculum into Chinese.

They are also interested in the teacher retraining that would be needed to carry out such a program. They even went so far as to have one of our members teach a class using the discovery technique and then test the children. We find that the Chinese are enthusiastic about continuing

such exchanges of information and, if relations were normalized, would probably seek to send students to the U.S. Indeed, after Zbigniew Brezinski's July visit, the Chinese indicated a willingness to exchange science students immediately. In effect, the Gang of Four emphasized a nontraditional political curriculum but employed traditional teaching methods. The new regime is going back to the traditional curriculum but is exploring new pedagogy, including the use of educational media (television, filmstrips, etc.).

One of the most fascinating aspects of Chinese life is state assignment of all jobs, each to be kept for life. The only way jobs are changed is through physical disability or through unusual family circumstances. The high schools have a crucial role in the initial assignment of work areas. If a class of 500 youngsters, say, is graduated from any high school, the state or local authorities will tell the school what *number* of graduates to keep in the city and what number to send to the countryside. Secondary school authorities, however, decide *which* graduates go or stay. The school's decisions are made on the basis of student grades, family circumstances, motivation, and other criteria. The probability is high that a family's second son will be "sent down." (This policy serves another purpose: It is an informal means of enforcing birth control, a policy the Chinese have promoted successfully through various campaigns.)

In visiting factories, we found that a persistent theme was the reinstatement of work incentives. Factory workers are given specific goals to reach and are paid extra when they exceed those goals. The whole national exam system in education is a type of incentive and constitutes a big change from the policies of the Gang of Four. It was particularly interesting to find that the national government had taken over the exams and eliminated all provincial differences.

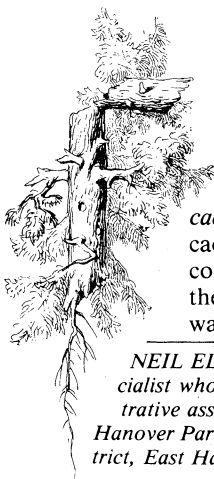
Another striking aspect of Chinese life is how glorification of the army is integrated into the basic curriculum materials. This is not usually an aggressive theme, but it serves to stress defense of the motherland. Children are dressed up as army officers, and they have small plays about how the army is overcoming resistance and how hard soldiers work. The army theme is also played up as an example of self-sacrifice and the morality of helping others.

We saw only a small part of a large country, hence my impressions are limited. Our tour was primarily of cities, despite the fact that China's population is 80% rural. While our observations cannot hope to represent the current status of an entire nation, we did see what the leadership *desires for the future*. We also found Chinese officials eager to understand education in the U.S. and reasonably frank in their responses to our questions. □

The Education of Plants

by Neil Ellman

Mr. Ellman throws some blight on a shady area of American education.



or many centuries, plants — particularly the geranium (*Pelargonium*), dracaena (*Dracaena*), and all forms of cactus (*Cactaceae*) — were considered uneducable. But then came a discovery that was as fundamental and

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far-reaching for the education of the plant as the invention of the hickory stick was

"Il faut cultiver lettres ou son jardin."

— Voltaire

"The greatest service any man can do for his country is to add a useful plant to its culture."

— Thomas Jefferson

for the education of the "whole child": Plants could respond to musical and verbal stimulation. Since that great moment when an African violet (*Saintpaulia ionantha*) first withered under a devastating barrage of verbal abuse and then revived to the strains of Mahler's *Fifth Symphony*, there has been a rush of research and polemic in the field.

At first the findings were attacked by the traditionalists, who insisted that plants have no innate intelligence and therefore could not be trained at even the lowest levels of the cognitive domain. Called