CHANGE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA*

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ABSTRACT

Developments in Chinese higher education since the creation of the People's Republic in 1949 are reviewed with special reference to the periods before and after the Cultural Revolution. Recent changes in admission policies, the use of work experience, the linking of theory with practice, length of course, and teacher-student relationships are discussed.

Introduction

Contemporary Chinese education has evolved from a traditional heritage dominated by the Confucian value system. The modern system of education developed only in the twentieth century; the Imperial examination system, the hub of traditional society, was not abolished until 1905. It is against this background that change can be assessed and the forces leading to progress be analysed.

The two significant factors affecting educational reform since 1949 have been the ideological goals of the Chinese social philosophy and the economic needs of her national reconstruction. Reconciliation of these two demands has proved in practice to be extremely difficult up to the present time. The reforms arising from the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution indicate the latest lines of thinking in education though it must be noted that the Chinese emphasise the experimental nature of the current changes. The role of the products of higher education, the intel-

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lectuals, and the nature of their social relationships with the mass of producers, their fellow men, is regarded as of the utmost importance in the building of New China. This theme is explored in the following pages especially in the light of the educational reform programme of the Cultural Revolution.

The Chinese Tradition

The predominance of Confucian thinking permeating the traditional Chinese value system was an enormous problem for any twentieth century government wishing to turn an agriculturally based society into an industrial and modernised society. This factor proved a troublesome sociological legacy for the government of the People’s Republic of China, when it came to power in 1949 and set about the transformation of the country. Significant ideas and practices inherited from Chinese tradition that would have some bearing on future educational developments included:

1. The low social status of women, especially as recipients of education.
2. The idea that education, which produced scholar-officials, included the assimilation of ethical values as well as academic learning.
3. Though the intellect in itself was acknowledged, greater status was given to the individual’s moral integrity and ethical values. The scholar-official class was expected to influence the social ethos and to educate the people morally by the example of its own ethical conduct and by precept.
4. There was a clear social dichotomy between mental and manual work. The educated class felt it demeaning and undignified to soil their hands with any form of manual work and regarded themselves as superior people.
5. The elite scholar-intellectual class regarded education as their exclusive prerogative. Literature and literacy were monopolised by them.

The First Decade 1950-59

In 1949 the functioning educational system was a three tier system modelled on Western lines, with primary school from 7-12 years of age, middle school from 13-18 years of age (divided into junior middle 13-15 and senior middle 16-18) followed by higher education. In 1949 out of a population estimated at 500 million there were only 117,000 students in higher education and this level of education was still absorbing only a select group of students. Two ministries were set up under the control of