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Contemporary Education in China: An Inside View

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by Linda Maynard Powell

Only recently have large numbers of educators, politicians, businessmen and athletes been invited to visit the People's Republic of China. This is a new development since the twenty year period (1949-69) following the Communist Revolution when there was little contact between China and the United States. One result of limited contact was a lack of information for Americans about life in Communist China—home of one quarter of the world's population.

Since February of 1971 when U.S. President Richard Nixon announced to Congress that "a major aim of the United States during the decade of the 1970's was to bring China into a positive relationship with other nations of the world . . ." ¹ many events have brought China and the U.S. closer. The U.S. ping pong team's invitation to visit China in the spring of 1971, the U.S. support of Communist China's admission to the United Nations that fall, and President Nixon's visit in early 1972 all culminated in the famous "Shanghai communique," an eight page document summarizing the many things we differed on and the few we agreed on. Following the U.S. withdrawal of troops from Vietnam, liaison offices were established in Beijing and Washington (unofficial representation). Through these offices many unofficial exchanges were arranged between China and the U.S., trade began to develop and with visits by various officials, it became possible to negotiate normalization. On January 1, 1979 the United States and the People's Republic of China granted formal recognition to each other. Since then many thousands of Americans have visited China.

There are many ways to "see China"; the businessman sees a potential market, the journalist describes age old customs to a modern world, the educator tries to keep up with the phenomenal changes occurring day by day in the Chinese society, the student learns Chinese language and customs at summer institutes on Chinese campuses and the tourist sees glimpses of China's greatest achievements in daily visits to famous sites, tombs, museums, temples and palaces. Anyone who visits China, whether as a tourist or businessman, athlete or educator, cannot escape noticing some of the fundamental realities of contemporary China.

As a member of the 1982 Fulbright Study Team invited to the People's Republic by the Chinese Ministry of Education, a part of the cultural exchange program between China and the U.S., I spent an extraordinary six weeks studying and traveling throughout the country to learn more about China's history and culture. A new student of Chinese history with very little background, I felt the excitement and enthusiasm of a modern day Margo Polo. Wanting to share my experiences with so many people, I found it extremely helpful to keep a daily journal of personal experiences and a separate notebook for the twenty-four lectures we attended during our month long stay at the Beijing Normal University. Those two documents plus twenty-one rolls of slides present

an overwhelming amount of material to try to translate into a curriculum unit designed to be part of a half-year course on China for tenth and eleventh graders or a slide show for friends and colleagues. As I began reading through my 350 page journal and 300 page notebook and looking at my slides, I realized that what I wanted to share with my family, friends, colleagues and students was that sense of China as a living reality.

One of the most important realities of China is her population. Recent census figures estimate the number at roughly one billion, which is four times the population of the U.S. and represents about one quarter of the world's population. China's success in feeding, housing and clothing this vast population is a monumental achievement of planning and maximum use of available resources. It's difficult for most of us to imagine what all these statistics mean. How does one visualize one billion people? Some of the realities of so many people may be presented to students in terms of familiar comparisons. In asking students to describe a typical day shopping in downtown New Haven the day or two before Christmas, some will respond with descriptive phrases of long lines, many people rushing about, nothing left in stores and so on. On any given day in China the scene is repeated but the numbers of people on the streets and in department stores can be multiplied by four to ten times! Chinese people always wait in long lines, sometimes need ration tickets for things they want to buy and many times cannot afford to buy the products they work on.

Related to the population problem, a major "headache" for municipal authorities is the traffic. It is an understatement to call it heavy. In fact, the traffic volume during rush hour at a major intersection in Beijing is some 3,000 motor vehicles, 20,000 bicycles, and 40,000 pedestrians per hour! ² Although the population of Beijing (over 10 million) cannot be compared with that of New Haven (130,000), students may wish to do a similar count at the corner of Church and Chapel just for the sake of comparison. Some of the slides which can be used with this unit illustrate this point very well. Among those slides are many showing the tremendous amount of construction going on as the Chinese government is making a real effort to improve living conditions, and, at the same time, provide employment for the 30-35% of the population who are not peasants.

An equally important reality of China today is the Chinese view of education as something not confined to the schools but which permeates the whole social order. In addition to the many institutions that are "educational" in the narrow sense, our group visited a commune, two factories, a hospital, many homes, theaters, bookstores, restaurants, museums, and many tourist attractions. Living in dorms for a month in Beijing we observed people at work (6 days a week) and at leisure, in groups and individually, reading, exercising, and playing cards, ping pong and badminton in parks. Political posters and billboards, as common as commercial advertising is in the United States, urged the Chinese people to work hard under the Communist Party's leadership to achieve the four modernizations (agriculture, industry, science and technology, and military.)

Education is all pervasive in Chinese society and this is reflected in China's education policy. ³ Adopted in 1957, the policy's goal is to enable everyone to develop morally, educationally and physically so that all the people become both "Red" (loyal to the Party) and "expert" (well educated and trained for the job). In their efforts to integrate mental and manual labor (intellectuals with workers and peasants), the government requires intellectuals and administrators to do manual work at least one day a month. Some work on campus planting trees, raking grass, etc. Others may go to the countryside to help with crops.

There are three main educational aims for elementary schools in China today. The first is to develop the students moral character by teaching them to love the motherland, the Chinese people, manual labor, socialism and the Chinese Communist Party, and public property. The second goal is to enable students to

obtain a fundamental education, develop skills in reading, writing and science, possess social knowledge and cultivate good study habits. The third goal is to enable students to develop physically. At least one hour a day students are required to perform some type of physical exercise.

The aims of secondary education are built on those of the elementary level. The first is to develop the student's spirit of patriotism and internationalism. The student should possess the Communist moral character by supporting the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), and upholding socialism (fostering the viewpoints of the working class). The second goal is to enable students to master basic skills in math, foreign language, Chinese, etc. and gradually acquire the abilities of self-study and problem-solving. Students should also possess knowledge in production. The third goal is to enable students to develop physically and foster good habits in daily life and in labor.

A good socialist education in China integrates the following aspects: moral, intellectual, physical, aesthetic and productive education and ideology, political education and basic moral conduct. Intellectual education teaches systematic, scientific and cultural knowledge and skills, encourages intellectual thinking and basically enables students to acquire skills for socialist construction. Physical education teaches students knowledge and skills of physical training, health education and good habits like keeping clean. Aesthetic education fosters students "correct" viewpoints of the appreciation of the beautiful things (established by traditional standards) and to develop abilities of aesthetic judgement and creation of all beautiful things in their daily lives. In addition to after school organizations and clubs where students can further develop special talents, most major cities have Children's Palaces for those children who are talented in art, dance, music, etc. Education of productive labor teaches students fundamental principles and basic skills of modern production. The Chinese believe that training in practical productive labor will foster good work habits and love of other people. Productive labor is not the same as vocational education. From fourth grade on, every student learns various skills in productive labor by working for two weeks per year (or one month at high school level). Productive labor includes such activities as working in factories, cleaning a campus, or working in fields in the countryside.

Most schools offer the following subjects to middle and high school students: current events, politics, Chinese, foreign language (mainly English, some Japanese and Russian), math, physics, chemistry, biology, history, geography, natural knowledge (economics, general sciences), common knowledge in production, physical education, music, drawing and handwork. From the last year of middle school on, students can also take electives. Learning English is seen as the touchstone for getting ahead. It represents modernization so people all over China try to learn English by any means possible, even from their children.

Education is one area where the Communist record is remarkable. Before the Revolution of 1949, more than 80% of the population in cities were illiterate. The rate in the countryside was as high as 95% or higher. Often the case was with workers that for generations in one family, no one was able to read. The rate of enrollment in schools was as low as 20%. The number of schools was low and the distribution imbalanced. In many counties there were no middle schools (our middle and high school). Before the Revolution, or, as the Chinese say, before liberation, student enrollment in schools numbered 25 million. A major part of reorganizing education included opening more schools to workers and peasants. In 1951 students from peasant and worker families comprised 19.1% of the university population. By 1965 this rate was as high as 64.6%. Secondary school rate percentages are similar. In 1951 these students totalled 52.8% while in 1965, the rate was 81%.

The Chinese Communist Party spared no effort in their attempt to wipe out illiteracy. Before the Cultural Revolution (1966-76 a time when most schools were closed), more than 100 million, mostly young workers

and cadres, learned to read and write. 8,500,000 graduated from elementary schools before the Revolution (this was a part-time evening elementary program), 1,650,000 graduated from part-time secondary schools and 200,000 graduated from part-time universities and colleges.

China's new educational system is very much like the American system in its organization. It consists of the following levels: preschool, elementary (there are two kinds: general and part-time for workers and peasants), secondary (including the general middle school, part-time middle school and professional middle school) and higher education (universities, colleges, institutions and graduate schools). Schools are run in two ways: by the state or by the commune or factory. Generally speaking, elementary schools in the cities are run by the state. In the countryside elementary and agricultural middle schools are run by people's communes. The main difference between the two is that the system of leadership is not the same and financial support comes from different places. For example, elementary schools in cities are under the Bureau of Education, which supports the schools by providing them with teachers and financial aid. In the countryside, teachers are invited by the communes, so there is no financial support from the government. Communes support their own teachers. The government does offer some financial aid to the teachers to aid them and teachers can earn work points so that at the end of the year they are paid a salary according to the number of points they have earned. Because some communes are richer than others, teachers salaries vary in the countryside.

Children can enroll in kindergarten at the age of three. Again, there are state-run schools and factory, army unit or university run schools. There are also some people-run kindergartens. Kindergartens are either half-day, full-time or boarding programs. Some are attached to elementary schools.

In 1978 there were 164,000 kindergartens in China with a population of nearly eight million children.

Children enter elementary school at the age of six or seven and stay five or six years. Since 1981, most elementary schools have adopted a six year program. Most children go to school very near their homes, but there are some elementary schools on the grasslands, some on horseback (where teachers move around to give lessons to students) and also schools on boats. In the countryside there are morning, afternoon and evening classes so that children can study before or after work.

Today there are over 909,000 elementary schools in China with more than 140,000,000 students. This represents a 90% enrollment rate, a figure nearly five times higher than in 1949.

Secondary schools include middle schools, technical and professional (teacher-training) and spare-time middle schools. The two main tasks given to the general middle schools are to foster qualified students for higher schools and train qualified workers for various jobs.

Originally, the duration of general middle schools was five years, but now in many places this has been changed to six years. The six years are divided into two levels: junior middle school and senior middle school. There are over 162,000 middle schools in China with over 65,400,000 students, more than sixty times higher than the number in 1949.

Professional middle schools train middle level personnel for various vocations. Students entering these schools are required to have graduated from junior middle school and have some professional knowledge in a special area. The duration of these schools is from three to four years. Because all professional schools were closed during the Cultural Revolution some students entering these schools now have already graduated from senior middle schools and are completing the professional program in two years.

There are seven types of professional middle schools: technical, agricultural, forestry, medical, financial and economic, physical education, and art. There are more than 1700 professional schools in China with more than 500,000 students enrolled.

Teacher training schools are included in these schools. Students are drawn from senior middle school graduates and complete their training in three years. Tuition is free. Elementary school tuition is five yuan a year, middle school is 10 yuan a year. There are over 1,046 teacher training schools in China with an enrollment of more than 360,000 students (29% women).

The main task of colleges, universities and institutions in China is to train higher level qualified personnel, develop science, culture and technology. The requirements for entering these schools are to have graduated from senior middle school (or to be on an equal level, shown by examinations) to be under the age of 25 and not married. The state holds national examinations each year to select the best students. The duration of most of these programs is four to five years. Tuition is free although students are expected to pay for their food. All medical care is free for college and university students. The government assigns jobs to students who graduate.

Between 1949 and 1978 over 2,900,000 students graduated from full time universities and colleges. This number is sixteen times higher than the total number of graduates for the twenty year period before 1949.

In 1978 there were 598 universities, colleges and institutions in China. Among them, 89 are considered "key" or special. The number of students enrolled is more than 850,000. Graduate school programs in colleges and universities usually have a duration of between two and four years.

Many Chinese attend a variety of adult education programs. In 1978 more than 68,000,000 attended spare-time elementary or secondary schools, while 550,000 people attended universities run by factories. Since 1979 university programs have been broadcast on T.V. Subjects taught include Chinese, history, geography, physics, math and foreign languages (English, Japanese and French). These programs are repeated all day long so that both children and adults can watch them.

Since 1979 T.V. University has become an effective means of developing higher education in China. In the summer of 1982, the first generation of China's T.V. University students, totalling 78,031 men and women, graduated. Most worked full time jobs while completing requirements in mechanical engineering or electronics, the two major programs. Altogether more than 440,000 students are enrolled in T.V. University.

Education in China has undergone deep changes and continuous improvement in the past thirty years. In her efforts to become a modern socialist state China has made great achievements in wiping out illiteracy. With a solid foundation to rest on, it will be interesting to watch a more confident China build for the future.

Strategies and Lessons

This unit is intended as background material for teachers intending to use the slide shows on Chinese schools. How much of the material is used depends on the level of the class and the time available to discuss education in China. For the author, it will be part of a new half-year course on China taught to sophomores and juniors. Most of the material in this unit will be covered in one week to ten days in conjunction with several slide shows and short readings students will discuss in class. Because it is a contemporary issues class, most of the background history covered will only go back as far as the early 1800's when the first substantial western contact was made in China. Both *China: History, Culture and People* published by Globe Book Co. and

my last year's unit "China: Portrait of Change" provide an overview of the period between 1800 and 1949.

One of the most obvious ways to keep up with the current situation in China is for students to collect and summarize recent newspaper and magazine articles for possible discussions or debates. Some students may wish to focus on the U.S. sale of arms to Taiwan as one theme, or on the recent census and issues connected with the population problems.

An annotated set of slides on the schools I visited will be available for teachers to borrow from the Institute Office. Some of the schools included in the slides are the Third School for Deaf-Mutes in Beijing, the Central Institute of National Minorities, and Experimental School (elementary) attached to Beijing Normal University, the Second Middle School in Beijing, a reform school in Shanghai, the main Children's Palace in Shanghai, the Key Middle School attached to Nanjing University, the Panda Factory Nursery School in Nanjing and Beijing Normal University.

In addition, a cassette tape with morning wake-up music, songs of elementary school children and music played by students from the Music Conservatory in Beijing is available in the Institute Office. Several other tapes featuring Chinese folk songs and contemporary popular music are also available.

Notes

1. Robert Vexler, *China* , p.164.
2. China Pictorial, p. 20.
3. From a lecture on education and visits to schools.

Bibliography and Resources

Most of the material in this unit came from lectures given at Beijing Normal University by Professors Shen Shihan and Gao Qi and from notes I took during the brief introductions given at some of the ten schools and institutions I visited in China.

Probably the most comprehensive and readable book about China is John K. Fairbank's *The United States and China* , Cambridge: Harvard University Press, Fourth Revised Ed., 1979.

B. Michael Frolic. *Mao's People: Sixteen Portraits of Life in Revolutionary China* , Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980. Very nice for both students and teachers—16 short vignettes, gives reader some insights into what life is like in China now and some concerns of individuals interviewed.

William Kessen, ed. *Childhood in China* . New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974. Based on interviews with

children, teachers, administrators and parents conducted in 1973.

Ministry of Education, *Education in China* . Education in China Group, Beijing, 1981. A book given to me by the Ministry of Education, filled with charts, tables and beautiful photographs of the students in Chinese schools.

There are many magazine articles that students and teachers may enjoy. Two in particular are *National Geographic* 's June 1981 issue "Two Years Teaching in China," and the *New Yorker* series beginning on May 10, 1982 by John Hersey.

Both the audio-visual department in the City of New Haven and the East Asian Resources Center at Yale University on Trumbull Street have films and filmstrip sets on China.

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