



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute  
1983 Volume VI: Cross-Cultural Variation in Children and Families

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## **Secondary Education in Urban China: The Search for a Marxist Model**

Curriculum Unit 83.06.06  
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This unit represents one aspect of a study of contemporary history in China, that is, the events since 1949. It serves as a sequel to two other units written on China, one in 1981 on China's history between 1840 and 1949 and the second on the structure and organization of schools before and after the Communist Revolution in 1949. Most textbooks approach the contemporary period by dividing it into various disciplines or chapters on political changes, agricultural reforms, industrial developments and social changes. For my students, this bifurcation is confusing as students have difficulty sorting out the agricultural reforms from the five-year industrial plans, etc . . . Even more difficult for them to understand is the relationship among the political, economic and social sectors of China's culture, or for that matter, of their own society. Many students feel that the subjects they study in school are far removed from the government or the economy. In my effort to bring more life to the study of China, I have chosen China's urban secondary schools as a focus through which my students, by studying about their Chinese contemporaries, may learn that educational systems reflect the political, economic and social values of a culture. Part of this study expresses my efforts to understand what I saw and heard in Chinese classrooms during my visit in the summer of 1982. An even larger aspect of this unit is my attempt to find some answers to the many questions posed by my enthusiastic students about the lives of Chinese adolescents.

The unit is divided into two sections. The first part explains the basis for and characteristics of the three educational models developed in China since the late 1950's. The second includes activities, sample lessons, possible resources and annotated bibliographies for teachers and for students. A set of slides on education in China accompanied by a written text for the slides is available in Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute office.

The twin promises of the Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 were 1.) to restore Chinese pride and prosperity through economic development and 2.) to improve opportunities for the majority of the population of "have nots" in China (Unger, p. 197). Given China's backward economic state and a population of over one billion people, eighty percent of whom are peasants, accomplishing these goals is ambitious to say the least. In education, these promises have developed into distinctly different strategies. Suzanne Pepper in "Chinese Education After Mao", (*China Quarterly* , March 1980), labels these strategies as "egalitarian" and "hierarchical." Jonathan Unger in *Education Under Mao*, calls them "developmental" and "redistributive."

The "egalitarian/redistributive" strategy was introduced during the late 1950's (Great Leap Forward) and came to mean reducing the three main differences between 1.) city and countryside, 2.) worker and peasant

and 3.) mental and manual labor. (Suzanne Pepper, p. 2 and Stanley Rosen, p. 3.) In essence, the goal was to educate as many people as possible under equal conditions. Students applying for entrance into universities were selected based on their class background and political activism. This strategy was associated with the Communist goal of improving opportunities for the masses.

The second strategy, “hierarchical/developmental,” was one associated with the goal of rapid economic development and therefore one which favored an elite group of highly intellectual students. Since the early 60’s, three educational models have been developed; each stresses either developmental or redistributive values, depending on the group in power. The early 60’s or Pre-Cultural Revolution model was hierarchical, the Cultural Revolution structure was egalitarian and the Post-Cultural Revolution model (1977-83) more hierarchical and elitist than the Pre-Cultural Revolution Model. Each of the structures was established for particular reasons and/or to solve problems. Each has had severe consequences for China’s youth. (Rosen, p. 4.)

### **Pre-Cultural Revolution Education Model (1958-66)**

There was widespread consensus on the importance of university education among students, school officials, and the party leadership in the early 1960’s. With the failure of the Great Leap Forward, a plan for rapid industrial and agricultural modernization, the educational policy stressed the need for those with higher education. (Rosen, p.6.) The competition to climb the educational ladder became fierce and tensions mounted over the criteria used to select those who could enter the university: academic performance, family-class origins and political performance. (Jonathan Unger, pp. 12-14.)

Schools were far from equal in this period. Most city schools, supported by the state were superior to schools run by the people (“minban” schools) in the countryside. In addition, most city schools were full-day schools, known as “keypoint”, had the best teachers, students, facilities and supplies. (Rosen, p.6.)

The competition to get into “keypoint” schools began after primary school with exams identifying the “best” students for junior middle keypoint schools (our junior high, grades 7-9). Exams were also given to select the cream of the crop for keypoint senior middle schools (our high school, grades 10-12). Keypoint schools outdid ordinary schools in two main ways. They adjusted when state policies did by accepting more students based on academic performance in some years and based on class-origins in other years. Secondly, keypoints always had higher numbers of students accepted into major universities. In this sense, the competition among students was matched by that of school officials who were praised for high promotion rates. (Rosen, pp. 6-9.)

In addition to academic performance, a second criteria considered in selecting students at each step of the educational ladder was family class-origins. Inheritable in the male line, children of classes which in pre-revolutionary times had been exploited were now given educational priority. Basically, there were three classes ranked in the following order: 1.) good-class origins included Revolutionary leaders (cadres), army men, martyrs, pre-liberation (pre-revolutionary) industrial workers and their families, former poor and lower-middle peasant families, 2.) Middle-class origins were-non-intellectual middle-class such as peddlers and clerks, and former middle-peasant families, as well as middle class intellectuals (teachers, professionals); 3.) Bad-class origins included former capitalists, “Rightists” (those outspoken critics of Communist policies), pre-liberation landlords, and counter-revolutionaries. (Unger, pp. 13-14.)

A third criterion for admissions was the student’s political performance. The students from “good-class” families were presumed to have inherited their parents commitments to the revolutionary cause and thus had somewhat of an advantage here. (Unger, p. 14.) Other students earned points by participating in organizations

such as the Young Pioneers or by performing “good socialist deeds.”

Although enrollment policies rested on all three of these criterion, children of intellectuals (middle-class) and cadres (good-class) clearly had the advantage in this period. When the numbers of eligible students grew in the mid 60's, university admissions criteria favored “good-class” students. Thus, the school system, as selectors of the next generation's professional strata, was teaching a conflict of values. The system “channeled students of different backgrounds into schools of different qualities, promoting friction among them.” (Unger, p.28.) In their lessons students learned that competition among themselves was “unsocialist,” while in reality, they were being evaluated by their grades, examination scores and by their political activism. Although there was no systematic education in political theory, students' everyday behavior was evaluated in small group sessions. Participating in labor classes and gaining admission into such organizations as the Young Pioneers or Red Guards (Communist Youth Group), represented successful behavior. Prominent themes in stories studied by these groups were patriotism and social action. Stories about ordinary people such as Lei Feng and Wang Jie encouraged daily performance of small acts which served the people. These lessons led to what Jonathan Unger describes as “petty activism,” or students trying to outdo each other in good deeds. (Unger, p.97.)

For the majority of China's high school students in this period, the prospects for the future were not bright. Even with vocational training, finding a job was difficult. By 1965 there were virtually no jobs available and the government, through Labor Offices, was pressuring unemployed youth to emigrate to the countryside (rusticate). Through the mass media, students were encouraged to settle voluntarily as a sign of their political convictions. Many students saw this as their failure to climb the educational ladder. Many felt that the rustification campaign was a dumping ground for “bad-class” or unemployed youth. (Unger, pp. 42-44.) The tensions created by academic and political competition were heightened by the reinforcement of the students' perceived failures which resulted in their being sent down to the countryside.

### **The Cultural Revolution Model of Education (1966-76)**

Zedong, China's leader for over 25 years, instituted a “cultural revolution” in 1966. Heeding the call of Chairman Mao, young people were encouraged to participate in Mao's campaign to establish the “Great Democracy” and quiet the critics of the CCP. Urging young people to join the Red Guards, Mao directed them to attack “bourgeois authorities who spread revisionist poison. (Unger, p. 113.) Old habits, customs, ideas and traditions were challenged in “big poster” campaigns and in essays in newspapers. Schools were closed in May of 1966 and most remained closed for a period of two to six years until a new educational policy could be developed. In this time, students had an opportunity to vent the tensions and grievances which had mounted in the early 60's. They attacked the teachers, burned books and destroyed property of the educational system that in one way or another discriminated against them. (Interview with Wang Hsingyang.) The arena of competition for the next several years was transferred from the classroom to streets. The students had learned valuable organizational skills in school which they immediately used in putting together youth groups based on class origins. Calling their organization the Red Guard, the cadre children were even more extreme than their schools had been in defining membership based on class. The result of their stress on “class struggle” and emphasis on political performance was that two antagonistic factions emerged in the Red Guard, both competing for the “big deeds” of the Cultural Revolution.

Jonathan Unger describes in detail the alliances and issues which ultimately led to the students' downfall. Ironically, it was the most active elements in the Red Guard who were to lose the most. By 1968 the Party changed the course of revolution. No longer of use to the cause, nearly twenty million, or almost a whole generation of young people, were forced to go to the countryside. (Unger, pp. 133-135 and Helen Sui.)

In 1968 when the first schools re-opened, a new educational model emerged. The major objective of the new egalitarian system was the elimination of distinctions between schools and students, between “key” and ordinary schools, full and work-study schools, etc . . . (Rosen, p. 12.) Suzanne Pepper describes the characteristics of the new structure as reflecting an emphasis on quantitative rather than qualitative goals. Universal primary schooling became possible only by reducing the total length of schooling from twelve to nine or ten years. There was an emphasis on practical knowledge. Materials were simplified and students and teachers performed manual labor. Students in grades four through nine worked for one month in a factory or on a commune, while high school students and their teachers worked for six weeks. No longer were there part-time schools for some and full-time schools for others. Nor were there “key” schools. Instead, all students attended schools in their neighborhoods. In addition, students of all abilities were in the same classes and no students were kept back. School administrations were reorganized with committees of cadres, workers, teachers and students making important school decisions. (Pepper, pp. 2-3.)

Following a highly traumatic few years, this new and untested model produced a very chaotic atmosphere in schools. The reasons for this chaos had to do with those directly affected: school administrators, teachers, and students. Political fear on the part of administrators to carry out the “wrong” ideas, coupled with a lack of bureaucracy to transmit and process reform, resulted in teachers making administrative decisions. Described as “bourgeois intellectuals . . .” whose “work was dangerous,” teachers were not only reticent about discussing anything but politics, many tried to leave their profession. After running out in the streets for two years and coming back into a new system, students were undisciplined. However, some descriptions of their actions sounded a bit familiar . . . “coming late to school, fighting, attacking teachers, reading bad novels . . .” (Unger, pp. 147-149.)

The reasons for the failure of the Cultural Revolution reforms were numerous. One of the most obvious was that while the reforms changed the structure of the schools, they did not provide a new evaluative apparatus. Students were still being judged by the standards of the old hierarchical model. Those evaluations indicated an overall decline in student achievement. A second difficulty lay in the student’s disillusionments with their so-called “practical” education, which many saw as free labor. As class-line declined in importance as a Party issue, the students most active in defending this policy realized their chances for becoming the new leaders were slim. The changes in Chinese politics had made a full circle. This was reflected in the establishment of a new educational system, one which is not quite a duplicate of the Pre-Cultural Revolution Model because it is even more elitist than the one it is based upon. (Unger, p. 205.)

### **Education Since Mao (1977-82)**

Although the Cultural Revolution only lasted a few years, the aftermath of it continued until 1976 when China’s two great leaders died, Chou Enlai in January and Mao Zedong in September, and the Gang of Four was arrested and accused of instigating many of the troubles in the Cultural Revolution Period. With the purge of this Shanghai faction (Mao’s wife Jiang Qing and the Three others from Shanghai, published a magazine from that city), the CCP leadership made a systematic attempt to wipe out all traces of the “lingering influences” of the Cultural Revolution, and, in its place, restore the Pre-Cultural Revolution educational model. In this sense, the Cultural Revolution was a great watershed in Chinese education, and replaced the Communist Revolution of 1949 as a baseline for comparison of schools before and after this chaotic period.

Officially announced in the autumn of 1977, the new model has goals that are clearly more qualitative. Deng Xiaoping and Hua Guofeng are leaders who support the rapid economic development of China. What that means for China’s students is significant change. While school enrollments reached their highest points in China’s history during the Cultural Revolution, this trend is now being reversed. It is estimated that 12% of

China's primary school graduates do not continue their education, while 50% do not continue after junior middle school. (Kessen, p. 152.)

Entrance examinations have been reinstated at all levels, junior middle, senior middle, and university. Because the tests are standardized, teachers and the best students spend an inordinate amount of time preparing for them. In addition, there are many constraints on who can even sit for the exams. Employed youth are encouraged to attend "spare-time" evening classes or to enroll in T.V. Universities. (Pepper, p. 12.)

Specialized education is being expanded with the keypoint system restored at all levels. The rationale used in answering the criticism of this elitist system is that China must train people as quickly as possible and that with a scarcity of resources, it is not possible to raise the standards significantly for all at once. (Pepper, p. 23.) Now there are more keypoint schools than before the Cultural Revolution, although, in 1982 there has been an attempt to "weed out" those not truly "key" and turn them into ordinary or technical schools. There are also levels among key schools denoting a further hierarchy. The lowest level key schools are the district keypoints, followed by city keypoints, with provincial level being the highest. Of the ten schools I visited, every one was a keypoint school and most were connected with a major university. Most students at these schools were children of intellectuals. In the rural areas, part-time schools have become a local responsibility. Other special schools include those for minority children (China has 55 National Minority groups), cadres, overseas Chinese and some special schools for just girls or boys. Every district of every major city also has Children's Palaces for the very talented in music, art, or theater.

As far as curricula is concerned, many subjects abolished during the Cultural Revolution have now been restored. New subjects added include courses on topology, child psychology, computer science, engineering, industrial management and administrative development. The Ministry of Education is working on standardizing textbooks nationwide. While many of the major subjects are the same, the content is being expanded, especially in science and math.

In line with a renewed emphasis on academic performance came a redefinition of intellectuals as "workers engaged in mental labor." In an intense campaign to raise the status of teachers, newspaper articles and even songs of students refer to the teachers as "gardeners tending to the successors of revolution," or "engineers of the human soul." (Pepper, p. 30.) To remove all doubt about the importance of intellectuals, many steps are being taken to improve living conditions and to allow more time for professional endeavors. Professional titles are being restored and major contributions are being honored and commended. In the interest of strengthening science and technology, more international academic exchanges are taking place today. (Pepper, p. 31.)

Recent adjustments in this latest educational structure provide some important insights into the problems of the new strategy. As the non-key schools continue to be weeded out, the pressure builds for students and administrators. And, as the gap widens between those students in key schools and those in ordinary schools, the competition becomes awesome for the six to seven million graduates scrambling for the fewer than 300,000 openings (less than 40% in the Universities.) For the majority of students, this system breeds a "crisis of faith." Some of the hard realities speak for themselves. Today there are over 400 million Chinese people under the age of 16. Eighteen million babies are born each year. China has an estimated work force of five hundred million with twenty-six million unemployed. The crime rate for 1980 revealed that 80% of all crimes were committed by people under the age of 25. (Rosen, pp. 23-25.)

In the wake of such tremendous pressure to pass the exams, classroom teaching techniques emphasize written learning and memorization of huge numbers of facts. Students spend time learning facts that they do

not necessarily understand. In the pursuit of a university education, they have become less politically and physically active. Thus in the past few years, a renewed stress is being laid on a student's need for a well-balanced education intellectually, morally and physically. This is reflected in the criteria used since 1981 to select students for university admissions. Now school grades, extra activities and athletic ability are considered in addition to exam scores.(Rosen, p. 31.)

Despite the reintroduction of compulsory ideological and moral education courses, this hierarchical system does not teach these values in practice. Deliberately structured to gain the maximum advantage from cities where there is already an intellectual elite, this system is reinforcing the difference between city and countryside, between intellectual and manual laborer, and between the children of parents in other technical specialties. Although the system may avoid unnecessarily high expectations by everyone knowing from an early age what to expect from the system, motivating students to work and study in China's school may become more of a problem.

### **Future Prospects—The Big Challenge**

Secondary school structure varied since the early 60's as priorities of regimes within the CCP have varied. The Pre-Cultural Revolution Model performed several functions by preparing students for a high education, producing socialist workers and redistributing values in favor of those classes who had formerly been deprived. Unfortunately, the competition led to advantages for the intellectual and cadre children. (Rosen, p. 31)

The Cultural Revolution model attempted to wipe out these former advantages and thus eliminated academic achievement as the main criteria for advancement. But the elimination of competition removed students' motivation.

The Post-Cultural model is a response to the perceived failings of its predecessor. Since the most obvious effect of that model was lower academic standards, academic achievement has been raised to a place higher than ever. With such clear cut divisions between key and non-key schools, the lack of student motivation and competition has some educational leaders concerned. Stanly Rosen, Jonathan Unger, and Suzanne Pepper all agree in their studies on China's school systems that the problems in China's schools today present more of a challenge than any in the past twenty years. It may be that in evaluating these strategies, the educational leaders will devise a system in which elements of both the "egalitarian" and "developmental" philosophies are balanced.

## **Activities and Sample Lessons**

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Most filmstrips about education in China present the first model described in this unit, the Pre-Cultural Revolution Model based on hierarchical strategy of education. Before showing such a filmstrip to the class, emphasize the fact that this was the model in

1. China between 1958 and 1966 and, therefore, the model points up the differences in education before and after the Communist victory in 1949. After previewing the filmstrip, make up questions for discussion or for written response. General topics of discussion might include:

1. criteria used to select top students at each level of the educational ladder,
2. inequalities of the schools,
3. successes/failures of the model,
4. conflict of values taught (be socialist while the school system judges you individually),
5. evidence of political messages in lessons,
6. evidence of economic values/social values,
7. aspects of education that remain from traditional Chinese education (if you have discussed traditional education).

If necessary, prepare a vocabulary list of words used in the filmstrip, such as keypoint, minban, cadre, Young Pioneer, etc . . .

It may be possible to explain the meaning of “hierarchical” by having students set up a pyramid, showing the steps upward in this model.

*(figure available in print form)*

2. One of the best descriptions of the Cultural Revolution Education Model can be found in William Kessen’s *Childhood in China* (chapter 6). In twenty-two pages, students can read about the educational philosophy and curriculum with detailed descriptions of classes in Chinese language, English, physical exercise, politics, productive labor, music and dance; selection, training and role of teachers; evaluation of students, student organizations and the “sending down” of urban youth to the countryside.

Before reading this passage, students should be familiar with some of the events of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), including the rationale for it. General topics of discussion might include:

1. the role of the students in the Cultural Revolution,

2. the characteristics of the new model of education, clearly a response to the inequities of the earlier model,
3. the affects of the new model on students, teachers, administrators,
4. the successes/failures of the model, the political, economic, social values emphasized by the model. Jonathan Unger in one
5. chapter of his book *Education Under Mao* describes the factionalism in the Red Guard. Some students may be interested in reading this chapter and reporting it to the class.

If possible, invite a former Chinese teacher or student of this period to speak to classes. The Council of East Asian Studies or any East Asian Outreach Centers are excellent sources of speakers.

- Show my set of slides of China's classrooms from my visit in 1982, portraying the most recent, Post-Cultural Revolution Education Model. Every slide has messages portraying the values of the new hierarchical model. These messages are described in the text
3. accompanying the slides. Break the class into groups of 5 or 6 students each and ask the group to list the values taught to Chinese students. One person from each group can list on the board the values in order of most important first. Point out similarities and discuss differences of lists. Divide list of values into categories (social values, economic, political values).
  4. Either in a written essay or in discussion, ask students to compare the Cultural Revolution Model with the present model. Ask them to point out the strengths of each. Ask students to imagine themselves in a Chinese classroom (as a result of parent's employment, etc . . . ). What difficulties might they encounter? What would they have in common with Chinese students? Another approach to this activity would be to ask students to
  5. think about what difficulties a Chinese student might have when entering an American classroom. What would he/she find familiar in American classrooms? Topics to discuss: subjects? schedules? student activities? teaching techniques? Students could put together a timeline by starting off in four groups, one tracing the social, a second tracing the economic, a third tracing political developments and a fourth group
  6. outlining the educational models. Have one person from each group arrange the events on the board. Discuss relationships of events with educational models.

*(figure available in print form)*

- To learn more about socialism, students can read the stories of Lei Feng and Wang Xie (Cultural Revolutionary heroes). Discuss how and why these stories were part of the moral
7. education of Chinese students. If possible, use translations of revolutionary ballets or plays to teach about what themes/values were prevalent in this period. Ask students why these stories would no longer be useful in teaching values today?



## RESOURCES

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1. East Asian Outreach Center, Trumbull St., New Haven, CT.
  - movies
  - filmstrips
  - multi-media kits
  - slides/cassettes
  - speakers
  - workshops/seminars
  - books/pamphlets / curriculumCatalogue describes all materials, services.
2. New Haven Public Schools Audio Visual Department, Winchester School, New Haven, CT.—filmstrips
3. U.N. Committee on U.S.-Chinese Relations, New York City.
4. Yale Art Gallery—East Asian Curator
5. Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, 53 Wall St., New Haven, CT.
6. Center for Teaching About China, New York, New York.
7. *Focus Magazine*, published by the Asia Society in New York City. Published three times per year. Has many sections suitable for hand-outs in class, book reviews, etc . . .

## Annotated Bibliography for Teachers

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Barendsen, Robert D., ed., *The 1978 National College Entrance Examination in the People's Republic of China*, U.S. Dep't of H.E.W., July 1979. A booklet giving the reading and overview of the eight areas Chinese students are tested in.

Chan, A., Stanley Rosen and Jonathan Unger, "Students and Class Warfare: The Social Roots of the Red Guard Conflict in Guangzhou", *China Quarterly*, September, 1983, pp. 397-446. An excellent analysis of the factionalism within the Red Guard during the Cultural Revolution.

Fei Xiaotong, "Chinese Intellectuals Today and in History", *China Reconstructs*, Beijing, April 1983, pp. 22-25. A short but explicit analysis of the role of the intellectual in Chinese society—relates this role to various models of education.

Kessen, William, *Childhood in China*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1975. A collection of extremely detailed descriptions of China's children from nursery school to high school age during the Cultural Revolution period—especially chapters 4, 5, 6.

Mauger, Peter, "Which Way China's Schooling?", *China Now*, London, S.A.C.U. Jan/Feb. 1982, pp. 12-17. A brief but interesting article on the present educational system in China and the problems with this system.

"New Moves Will Help Neglected Intellectuals," *China Daily*, June 18, 1982. One of many recent articles on China's new push to raise the status of teachers.

Pepper, Suzanne, "Education After Mao: Two steps Forward, Two Steps Back and Begin Again?," *China Quarterly*, March, 1980, pp. 1-65. One of the best studies of the changes in China's schools since the 1960's. Highly recommended.

Rosen, Stanley, "Obstacles to Educational Reform in China," *Modern China*, January 1982. pp. 3-40. Along with Pepper's article, this essay traces the changes in China's schools and makes connections between these changes and the political climate and economic circumstances reflected in the educational models. Highly recommended.

Sui, Helen, *Mao's Harvest*, A collection of poems, short essays reflecting the disillusionment of the generation of Red Guards with China's socialist government. Easily readable, highly interesting for students too.

Unger, Jonathan, *Education Under Mao*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982. The best book out on education in China's urban centers since the Cultural Revolution period. If a person could only read one book on this topic, it has to be this one.

"78,031 Graduate From T.V. University," *China Daily*, July 10, 1982. An article describing the recent emphasis on education for workers in China.

## **Annotated Bibliography for Students**

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Kessen, William, *Childhood in China*. Easily readable and very interesting descriptions make the observations offered by this book an excellent source of information about the Cultural Revolution education model. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 are recommended if students do not have time to read the whole book. Some copies of this book are available at Hillhouse and Lee High Schools within the Independent Study Programs.

Sui, Helen, *Mao's Harvest*. Short writings by Chinese former Red Guard members. Highly recommended.

Unger, Jonathan, *Education Under Mao*. Students might really enjoy several chapters of this book. If time permits only reading one or two, the chapters on the Red Guard Conflict and the newest educational model are the two I would suggest.

Also, any of the more recent newspaper or periodical articles provide updated information on education.

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