

CHINESE EDUCATION: MY EXPERIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING

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The educational system of a country is a broad and complicated topic. It can be explored in different perspectives. It relates to many statistics, policies, and theories; it also relates to politics, society, culture, and history. I experienced Chinese education as a very important process in my life. In this paper I will try to paint a picture of Chinese education based on my own experience and understanding.

Post-80s

I have to talk a little about my generation in China before relating my understanding of Chinese education. We are called to “Post-80s” which refers to the generation who were born from January 1, 1980, to December 31, 1989, in Mainland China after the introduction of the “One-Child Policy” (“Baidu,” 2012, para.1). This group of young adults has become the backbone of Chinese society in the aspects of the economy, culture, science and technology, education, and sports.

“Post-80s” is a term that has a cultural significantly meaning because it is a generation marked by controversy. Negative labels include “young,” “irresponsible,” “rebellious,” and “a generation who will ruin our country.” Positive labels include “a creative group,” “well-educated,” “characters,” and “deep consideration of the value and life.” Post-80s is a generation that witnessed the development and reform of China. They experienced the dramatic changes in almost everything: from poor to rich, from strict to broad, from closed to open.

Educational Structure

Depending on the settings of Department of Ministry of Education of China (<http://www.moe.edu.cn/>), the educational structure of China can be divided into fundamental education and advanced education in terms of the knowledge. It can be divided into special education, professional education, adult education, and international education in terms of the function. China also has ethnic education to meet the needs of Chinese unique situations.

Fundamental Education

As an average Chinese man, millions of my contemporaries experienced the same or a very similar process of education. We went to kindergarten from three to six years old and then spent a one year in preparation school. The six years of elementary school and three years junior middle school are sponsored by government; this is called nine-year compulsory education. In this period, students are assigned to different schools depending on their registered address.

After compulsory education, a student can choose the senior middle school or professional education depending on their interests; however, admission to the schools is based on the scores of a unified examination. Students attend senior middle school for three years. The government may still pay part of the tuition for residents in certain cities or areas. After senior middle school, a student can choose from a number of universities or professional colleges, but, again, the universities and colleges will admit only the students who attain certain scores on the College Entrance Examination.

Advanced Education

For most of the universities, colleges, and majors, it is formulated as four years in undergraduate school, two and half or three years in a master's program, and three years in a doctoral program. There are strict entrance examinations to correspond to each level of education; however, graduation is a relatively easy business. Central and local governments partially sponsor students depending on the level of universities or colleges.

Examinations

Historical Background

No one can understand the Chinese educational system without knowing the culture of examinations in this country. It originated from Confucius's (551 B.C.—479 B.C.) ("China Net", para. 2) theory—"学而优则士" ("China Poesy", para. 1), which is literally translated to "study well and then become an official." Confucius thought a country should be governed by people who are well-educated and intellectual. In a centralized and bureaucratic country, government officials control many resources, have much power, and have much more privileges than average people. Confucius's theory broke from the hereditary transference of political power, and it provided a chance for average people to change their status by studying well.

One thousand years later, the government of Sui dynasty (581 A.D.—618 A.D.) systematized Confucius's theory—study well, and then to become an official. The Emperor of Sui created the imperial examination system, a national examination for selecting officials from average people (Fu, 1993). For the purpose of impartiality, the score of the test was the only standard used by the government to recruit new officials (Ren & Xue, 2003). From that point on, the tradition of examination became rooted in Chinese people generation by generation. Because of this examination system, a centralized country can staff its government with well-educated people and provide some semblance of justice to society.

College Entrance Examination (CEE)

As I mentioned before, after compulsory education, the students have to take very strict examinations every time they want to evaluate their educational levels. The most important one is the College Entrance Examination; because Chinese society provides few opportunities people who do not graduate from college, getting into a college is very important. In many people's minds, the CEE is somewhat connected with the imperial examinations of ancient Chinese times. Because the CEE score is the only criterion for a student to be recruited, the media still likes to associate the CEE with someone's future.

The CEE is a national examination administered by the government only once a year. The examination time is the same all over China—June 6 and June 7, from 9:00 to 11:30 and 15:00 to 17:00. The content is the same: Chinese, math, foreign language, and liberal arts (history, geography, and politics), or science (physics, chemistry, and biology) (<http://www.moe.edu.cn/>).

The Influence of Examinations

We call our fundamental education an examination-oriented education. Paulo Freire, who was a Brazilian educator, philosopher, and influential theorist of critical pedagogy, termed it a banking education system. Students are assessed by test scores only, teachers are assessed by the test scores of their students; and schools are assessed by the percentage of students who are promoted to secondary

schools and universities. “The test” is everything. In the classroom, students are passive listeners: They do not ask why.

Students in secondary schools study very hard. They study from 6:30 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. from Monday through Friday and attend half days on both Saturday and Sunday. As a result, Chinese students are well trained and gain a great deal of knowledge and academic skills; on the other hand, they lack creativity, and they do not know how to apply the knowledge to real life.

Students cannot transfer to other universities or even to other majors because admission to universities and to majors are based CEE scores; for example, a student with a low score may be admitted to one major and/or university and not another, depending on the criteria set by that university. Every university and every major have their own standard scores for admitting students. It is rare for a student to transfer from a high score major to a low score major. If a student wants to transfer to another university or change a major, he/she needs to take the CEE again.

Society does not tolerate universities denying a student graduation because it believes that the student deserves to graduate after all the time, money, and energy put forth by the students, their families, and society. Another reason for allowing the mediocre student to graduate is that because he or she has achieved the level of knowledge measured by the CEE, he or she is thought to have the ability to graduate from a university; the university should take the responsibility if a competent student fails in its classroom.

As a result, a phenomenon of polarization is very common in the universities in China. Some of the students are really driven by their interest or personality, so they work hard and support the academic environment. The rest of the students just hang out every day.

Educational Reform Theories

China changed direction in 1978. It gave up the rigid communist thoughts and sought to provide more realistic wealth to its people; meanwhile, China shifted its socio-economic model from Russia to United States. American values started to influence Chinese society by emphasizing science, technologies, and education. Chinese people experienced the trend of thought toward American education—from defense to caution to acceptance. American education impressed “Post-80s” by its creativity, freedom, and individualization. “Post-80s” is a rebel generation that feels oppressed by the Chinese education system, so they are the core group that wants educational reform.

CEE is considered to be the fountainhead of the examination-oriented education. Many of the institutes and scholars advocate abolishing the CEE system. There is a phenomenon emerging in universities that shows the diversity of recruiting students. For example, South University of Science and Technology of China (SUSTC) claims that its recruiting criterion is 60% of CEE test score, 10% high middle school scores, and 30% of their own designed test score (“SUSTC”, 2012).

Even though that CEE cannot be really abolished because of (a) it is an effective way for the Chinese government to spread ideology and (b) it is relatively equal to everyone, SUSTC took a big step to offer opportunities to society.

In college, “Post-80s” students need more freedom. They want to know the real truth, not the “truth” under certain political rule. They need an active academic atmosphere to inspire them. With the years of effort Chinese universities are more progressive now. Students can criticize government and policies on campus, and they can talk about different religions too. Institutes accept the theories that are different from communist philosophy, but the anti-communism theory is still forbidden.

“Post-80s” is a generation experiencing major rapid changes in their lives, so they are impatient. Changes in the Chinese education significantly differ from the change in the Chinese economy: Educational reform is a slow and difficult process. Most “Post-80s” want change now, so many of them criticize everything the government proposes to improve education instead of accepting gradual change.

In recent years, more and more Chinese students have chosen to study abroad, especially in the United States. Returning students bring different education ideas and values with them; these ideas and values could serve as basis for educational reform. Returning students are often seen as the adhesive that bridges the gap between China and Western society. They consciously or unconsciously are moving China slowly, but steadily, into the integrated world.

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