The Chinese Controversy Over Higher Education

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The current Chinese leadership has been particularly vehement in its denunciations of the radical experiments in higher education of the early 1970s. No other single issue gained equal attention in the 1977-78 campaign to pillory the “Gang of Four,” and no other sphere of governmental activity since Mao’s death was so quick to be overhauled.

This ought not to have been surprising, since even before Mao’s death the controversy among the leadership over higher-education policies was evident in China’s newspapers. Essentially the dispute concerned whether China should use higher schooling more as a redistributive mechanism or more as a development tool. The Chinese revolution had come to power in 1949 on the strength of two appeals that had won mass national backing: a nationalist promise to restore Chinese pride and prosperity; and a social revolutionary pledge to increase the opportunities available to China’s great majority of have-nots. From the early 1950s onward all of the Party leaders supported both goals. But whenever new policies were determined, there was controversy over where and how to draw the balance between the goals. The moderates—the several groupings within the leadership which presently share power in China—have defined the revolution more in terms of its nationalist/development goals; Mao and the radicals, on the other hand, seem to have become willing by the mid- and late-1960s to sacrifice fast development if such development meant abandoning the redistributive goals which favored the “proletarian” classes.

This issue of development versus redistribution had begun to focus in the 1960s on China’s university-admissions policies—and for a simple reason. The mass education efforts of the 1950s had allowed greatly expanded numbers of children into high school, and for the first time there were far more candidates for enrollment in China’s universities than there were university openings available. For the
first time, too, the high-school student bodies included large numbers of young people from semi-literate working-class homes. Such students tended to have considerably greater problems with their studies than their classmates from the households of the urban intelligentsia (chih-shih fen-tze).¹

Placing great weight on performance in the university entrance examinations had given a fair percentage of the university openings to these children of the intelligentsia. With growing numbers of working-class families finding their children’s expectations disappointed in the tightening contest for university places—and with the revolution’s commitment to its redistributive goals thus put to the test—left-wing members of the Party had begun arguing with increasing vigor that the criteria for university admissions had to be shifted more in favor of the “good class” youths. But until the Cultural Revolution the majority of the leadership remained convinced that the revolution’s modernization goals precluded any policy that markedly discriminated against the chances of the most academically capable of the intelligentsia’s children.

One of the first decrees pushed through the Central Committee by Mao in the Cultural Revolution’s first months proclaimed the abolition of the university entrance examinations and a new method of enrollment, a combination of recommendation and selection in which proletarian politics are right to the fore. . . . The old examination system is a serious violation of the Party’s class line, shuts out many outstanding children of workers, former poor and lower-middle peasants and revolutionary cadres . . . and opens the gates wide to the bourgeoisie to cultivate its own successors.²

The Party radicals were aware that these proposals to disregard academic achievements in university admissions would do harm to the teaching of advanced university-level courses. But they did not see any pressing need for the universities to prepare a corps of highly trained technocrats and “experts.” In part this was because the radicals wanted to pursue a new approach to economic development. The Party’s left wing was oriented toward an economic strategy of smaller and technically less sophisticated factories. They argued that with such industrial development it would be enough simply to educate greater numbers of politically reliable “socialist laborers” with on-

² People’s Daily (Peking), June 18, 1966.
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the-job resourcefulness in handling non-advanced technologies.

The radicals' preference for this kind of economic strategy derived partly from their "class struggle" perspectives. Since those best at handling "expertise" and theoretical constructs were the "bourgeois" professionals and their offspring, neither the schools nor the factories were to be allowed to be arenas in which they could excel at the expense of the workers and their children. Education at all levels was to be used as a mechanism for eradicating the gaps between students from different backgrounds. No longer was it to serve as a means for sorting and stratifying students.

The Party radicals had another reason for downplaying theory and stressing the tangibly practical. While they realized, of course, that at least some personnel would have to have scientific and technical knowledge, they seem to have had scant comprehension of what scientific training entailed. They were convinced that knowledge was purposely "mystified" by experts to bolster their professional status, and that a simple common-sense approach—mingling plain explanations with practical demonstrations and shop-floor practice—could reveal the secrets of science within a short space of time. Advanced theoretical training was not only disadvantageous to the working classes and politically suspect for perpetuating a technocratic elite. It was also unnecessary: scientific technology was nothing but common-sense knowledge dressed up in fancy clothes; and much of it had already been learned by children in lower schooling.

THE FIGHT OVER UNIVERSITY RECRUITMENT PROCEDURES

There was hence little need, thought the radicals, to be worried about the "quality" of university entrants. Many of the young people accepted for university training could be chosen simply for being political enthusiasts, and might include peasant youths with merely junior high school or primary school educations. Since no attention need be paid to applicants' academic backgrounds, the examinations on

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3 For several years after the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese press was filled with tales of semi-literate but politically devoted workers devising simple machinery superior to the overly sophisticated ones which discredited technicians had proposed; the message was that technical advances henceforth could largely be of this intermediate kind.

4 Mao's own disdain for "abstruse" learning was expressed clearly in a talk in the summer of 1968: "As far as I can see, the basic courses of junior and senior high school and the last two years of primary school are about the same as those offered by universities. One should go to school for six years, at most ten years . . . . All basic courses are repetitious. As to courses of specialization, even the teachers don't understand." Mao Tse-tung Szu-hsiang Wan Sui (Long Live the Thought of Chairman Mao) (n.p., 1969), p. 693.
which the children of the middle-class intelligentsia had done so well could be entirely abolished.

Among urban applicants to universities, moreover, at least two years of full-time work—proletarian “practice”—would become a prerequisite. Ironically, this idea of an intervening period of work had been Khrushchev’s. He and other Russian leaders had been worried in the 1950s that Russia’s high-school graduates often looked down upon the manual labor jobs that many of them would have to assume. In 1958 the Russian government had passed regulations (soon rescinded) stipulating that after the seventh or eighth year of schooling all youngsters should spend time working at a factory or farm, and only after that would be able to take the entrance exams for a higher—usually vocational—stage of education. In addition, in 1959 Russia had adopted a university system where for the first 2-3 years of college, students would participate part-time in labor. Only in the last years of university would they devote themselves entirely to their studies. These Russian initiatives had attracted a great deal of attention in China during the late 1950s, and the radicals had apparently reworked them over the years into their own package of prescriptions for Chinese education.

After 1968, under the radicals’ new scheme, urban education through senior high school was shortened to nine or ten years (depending upon the city) and was made available equally to all urban youths. All the new senior-high graduates were then assigned directly to jobs, without taking into account their academic records when determining their job destinations. The choice of who went on to higher learning was made at the workplace, on the basis of one’s on-the-job performance. It is clear that “class-line” purposes were served by this new selection process. The youth of proletarian family background now had a considerably better chance than his or her academically superior workmate of “petty bourgeois” origins, since the political leaders of the workplace, themselves of “good” class background, could be expected to take class into account with appraising the dedication of applicants.

There was so much trouble and infighting in getting the universities reorganized that most did not open till the early 1970s. Every summer thereafter, each province established a temporary “enrollment office,” which sent out teams of cadres and professors to each of the cities and county capitals. There, the teams were augmented by

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the addition of several district- and county-level cadres and teachers.\(^6\) Applications then passed through a local procedure that was described by an official jingle: "The applicant applies,/The masses recommend,/The leadership approves,/The college [enrollment office] reviews." In reality, the "recommendation of the masses" was always pro forma, at least in the knowledge and experience of people I interviewed.\(^7\) It was the local-level political leadership who actually decided—and in some cases without the nominee having even to apply.

During the later stages of the Cultural Revolution in 1968, several million former high-school students had been shipped out of the cities to settle in the countryside. It had been a means of putting an end to the Red Guard conflicts. In addition, it had been an attempt by the government, which could not provide new factory jobs for most of the cities' young people, to cut back on urban unemployment.\(^8\) The urban-based Party officials and the university staffs preferred that the university enrollments from the countryside came mostly from among these rusticated urban youths rather than the ill-educated peasant youngsters. Thus, to the extent that the Party bureaucrats and colleges gained control over the selection procedures, the real rural youths tended to lose out. The 1970-71 enrollment figures for Wuhan University in Hupei Province suggest the degree to which this could occur. (See accompanying table. This case, admittely, is the most extreme one of which I am aware.)

**Wuhan University: Enrollees of 1970-1971 by Place and Type of Recruitment\(^9\)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Recruitment</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tr>
<td>From factories</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rusticated urban youths</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peasant youths</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>PLA soldiers</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Others (barefoot doctors, cadres, etc.)</td>
<td>20%</td>
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<td>(Total N = 1,245)</td>
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\(^7\) In Hong Kong during 1975-76 I interviewed several dozen young people and former teachers from China. Some had swum to Hong Kong illegally to escape working in the countryside. Most, however, were legal emigrants: either Chinese from Southeast Asia who had returned to China with their families in the 1950s and were now in transit back to their home countries, or young Hong Kong residents whose parents had sent them to China for their education.


The greatest proportion of the places in the practical sciences and in the engineering schools had been reserved for young factory employees with experience on the shop floor, and they normally returned to their work units when their university training was completed. But as if to offset the priority given to these young factory workers when recruiting for engineering schools, the urban youths recruited from the countryside were given the greatest share of the seats in philosophy, the social sciences, mathematics, and the pure sciences. The entrants to these disciplines were almost assured of never having to return to the countryside. The universities came to be seen by rusticated youth as the best means of escape from a life of impoverished labor in the villages.

The unintended result was that corruption set in early. In the absence of stringent entrance examinations or other strictly regularized means for selecting the new students, officials whose own children had been assigned to settle in the countryside could begin pulling strings and making use of the Party’s old-boy networks to win a university seat for their daughter or son. For its own smooth functioning, the Chinese economy requires extensive networks of favors-trading between economic and administrative units, since needed supplies and spare parts are not consistently available through formal channels. Officials now found it all too easy to make personal use of such networks to make contacts and reach bargains with other authorities who had influence over the university enrollment process. From interviews with two former university faculty members, and with former rusticated youths detailing who had been selected to attend a university from their own communes, it would seem that a substantial percentage of the rusticated youths who got in were from the families of Party officials, and that many of the peasant entrants were closely related to commune or village leaders.

At Peking University, according to separate interviews with six foreign students who were taking courses there during 1974-75, approximately 30-40 per cent of the student body was composed of the sons and daughters of Party officials. And even those figures do not tell the full story of the influence-peddling at work, for a fair number of the other entrants to colleges were being accepted through family connections and influence. An interviewee cites an example:

A good family friend, an engineer in a bridge-building unit, has a daughter who, like other pre-Cultural Revolution high-school students, was sent to the countryside in 1968. Her dad was best friends with his unit’s leaders, and af-
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ter the daughter was in the village for 2-3 years the dad’s work-unit found a way to get her back to the city to join the unit. Soon after, they selected her for a university. She’d been just a first-year student in junior high when the Cultural Revolution erupted! She studied at one of the Shanghai engineering institutes for about three years and has already graduated and returned to her dad’s unit.

She was now a “credentialed” engineer, with a lifetime total of only ten years of schooling!

From interviews with former students and teachers from Canton, it seems that most high-school students felt there was no use even contemplating a university education. It was not just because the university enrollments were smaller than before the Cultural Revolution or because, with millions of pre-Cultural Revolution high-school students also eligible for admission, the odds of any given post-Cultural Revolution graduate being admitted had become so slim. In addition, the impression had quickly spread that almost all the available places were going to the children of the officials and their friends. Students no longer even calculated the possibilities. “Going to a university,” a former Shanghai high-school teacher observed, “was out of the question for them, like people don’t think about whether it would be nice or not to live on the moon.”

The radical faction from Shanghai (now labelled the “Gang of Four”) was disturbed both by the distortions which the officials’ corruption had made to the enrollment programs, and by the program’s increasingly unpopular image among the students. In early 1974 the radicals launched a campaign against this practice of “taking the back door” into a university. Individual cases of “backdoor” admissions were widely publicized in the newspapers, and embarrassed parents had to make public promises to turn over a new leaf. 10 Despite this the irregular admissions practices persisted (according to more recent official reports) until at least 1977.

This particular problem had never been a bone of contention among the Party’s top leaders. They had all held a common distaste for the “backdoor” corruption. 11 But the Party’s more moderate leaders were considerably disturbed about the academic standards of

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even the genuinely “legitimate” entrants to the universities. The veteran educational administrators in the Party argued from the beginning that to accept a student body with standards too low would be tantamount to vitiating the essential academic functions of tertiary-level schooling. But the radicals were wary of imposing any sort of academic criterion, fearing it would provide an entering wedge for “moderate” efforts to put academic qualifications back in the forefront. As late as 1975-76, the radicals were publishing editorials, for example, taking to task faculty members of Tsinghua University—China’s foremost institute of technology—for doubting the abilities of a young peasant activist who had entered Tsinghua despite only three years’ of primary-school education.\textsuperscript{12}

Given such inadequate student backgrounds the universities and provincial authorities understandably were finding many of the students ill-equipped for even the elementary courses which had been prepared for them. In 1972, therefore, several provinces took the initiative and instituted written screening exams at the final county-level stage of the enrollment procedures. In April 1973, the State Council decided—at Chou En-lai’s suggestion—to institute similar examinations in all provinces.\textsuperscript{13}

Mao Tse-tung and his closest ideological allies, the so-called “Shanghai group,” were opposed to these measures, but apparently did not have sufficient strength in the state organs to block them. They were determined, however, somehow to nullify the decisions. They foresaw that the exams would inevitably be made more stringent each year, with the “old system” stealthily re-installing itself. One of the main strengths of the Party radicals was their near-control of the mass media—and Mao decided to put this to use. At a Peking meeting between some of the radicals and Mao’s nephew Mao Yuan-hsin, who was in control of the Liaoning provincial press, it was decided that “Liaoning would provide some [media] materials to be employed against the new exam scheme.”\textsuperscript{14}

At this opportune moment, a young man named Chang T’ieh-sheng entered the scene. A junior-high student in Liaoning at the time of the Cultural Revolution, Chang had been rusticated in 1968. In the summer of 1973 he was nominated to enter a university and

\textsuperscript{12} Ming Pao (Hong Kong), January 14, 1976, citing Kuang-ming Jih-pao.

\textsuperscript{13} E.g., FBIS, August 23, 1972, p. D6; Ming Pao, April 30, 1977; Ta Kung Pao (Hong Kong), March 18, 1977.

\textsuperscript{14} This charge of conspiracy was made in a more recent denunciation of the Gang of Four; see Liaoning Daily, November 30, 1976, cited in Current Scene, January 1977, p. 24.
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had reached the screening-exam stage, but he found himself stymied by all the questions in the math and science section. On the exam paper's back, he wrote an angry complaint, arguing that because he was too busy with agricultural labor, he had had no time to review this books—and adding that he detested bookworms who did not labor. Chang's complaints were headlined in the Liaoning press—though it took three weeks before the radicals could muster the support to have Chang's essay publicized nationwide.15

The media campaign—with Mao's support—forced the provincial administrations in the early autumn of 1973 to downplay the examinations they had prepared. Some provinces rescinded them; others retained an exam but announced it was open-book, with applicants free to discuss the answers among themselves.16 Some nominees, who had been turned down in the summer on the basis of their performances on closed-book exams, now reportedly got into college on the basis of their work-unit leaders' political recommendations. Not until 1975 did the universities and the enrollment committees regain their powers to make the final decision on entrants.

Thwarted in the first instance from selecting students whom they felt to be academically qualified, the college staffs adopted an alternative strategy. A number of universities instituted a special six-month introductory "refresher" course in the autumn of 1973,17 on the grounds that the new university entrants had "forgotten" many things while out of school. At the end of this half-year of high-school-level courses, a set of tests was administered. Those who were hopelessly behind were either dropped quietly from school or shifted to a less demanding vocational discipline.

Efforts by the moderates to restructure admissions procedures took other forms. They were worried that under the radical enrollment scheme the nation could not produce the new generation of scientists necessary for developing sophisticated weaponry and for keeping China abreast of world scientific advances. In 1972, according to interviewees from China and more recently published reports, Chou En-lai had sent instructions to the universities that a number of freshly-graduated high-school students should be admitted to universities, not just youths who had been out working. The Premier's in-

16 Wen Hui Pao (Hong Kong), November 19, 1973, relating an interview with one of the directors of the Kwangtung provincial university enrollment office.
tent seems to have been dual: first, to make sure that control over at least some of the decisions remained in the hands of the high schools, as one means of assuring better quality; and secondly, to avoid the possible loss of expertise—for example in the pure sciences—which is said to mature in early adulthood.\textsuperscript{18}

Again the radicals had tried to block the move. The \textit{de facto} head of the State Council’s Scientific and Education Group, Chih Ch’un— who was one of the major radical spokesmen—had refused to set up the necessary administrative machinery.\textsuperscript{19} Despite this, some university leaders now began to establish informal links with high-school administrators personally known to them, and began to funnel especially talented youngsters onto campus in small numbers directly from high school—not just in mathematics and science, but also in art, music, sports (!) and, in one case known to me, history. But since there were political risks to this direct admissions venture, university administrators protected themselves by taking in principally students of irreproachable class background. (Of the four cases of direct admissions for which I have detailed information, all were from veteran Party-cadre families.) The academic level of even these specially-picked entrants was probably less than desirable, inasmuch as China’s secondary-school system was in considerable disarray.\textsuperscript{20} Moreover, the numbers of such entrants remained comparatively small; and when Chou En-lai fell seriously ill in late 1975, the radicals moved to abolish the practice entirely. In the December 1975 issue of \textit{Red Flag}, Chou’s 1972 directive was singled out (though carefully unattributed to Chou) as a target for attack.

Despite the moderates’ efforts, only a small percentage of the skilled manpower which the higher scientific echelons felt they needed was being provided. There seems to have been increasing alarm in the scientific and military establishments that China would be endangering its future if the radical prescriptions in secondary and higher education remained in effect much longer.

\textbf{THE DEBATE OVER UNIVERSITY CURRICULA}

The radicals repeatedly observed in the press that before the Cultural Revolution China’s universities had too often structured their

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Peking Review}, November 11, 1977, p. 16.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

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curricula so as to meet the needs only of the very small proportion of college students who would become pure researchers. Radical curricular reforms now sought to eliminate from university coursework all material that would not be *directly* useful for most of the graduates. In particular, China’s media in the first half of the 1970s pointed to the medical schools, which before the Cultural Revolution had offered a six-year course for senior-high graduates. Medical training was now being shortened to three years, in part by teaching almost only in terms of symptoms and prescriptions—and only for the less exotic ailments. The function of higher education, as in the medical field, was to be limited to producing practitioners, rather than training “professionals,” researchers or advanced scholars. In point of fact, until Mao’s death in September 1976, post-graduate studies were not resumed, save at a handful of the nation’s universities.

Those within the leadership who were committed to modernization protested that these shifts in tertiary-level teaching would prevent China from developing a new generation of experts capable of achieving scientific experimentation up to world standards. What seems to have been a more moderate wing of the radicals’ own camp replied that China did not have great need for abstruse or highly sophisticated research. They cited cases of costly and esoteric research that had been conducted in medicine and the sciences while even common diseases and rudimentary technology problems continued to plague the countryside. Their implicit argument was that China’s best strategy was to stick to intermediate practical research, especially since China for several generations to come would be able to borrow technologies and scientific advances from the more economically advanced countries. While many modernizers were apparently swayed by such common-sense arguments, the bulk of the moderates became increasingly worried that the radicals’ curriculum reforms so downplayed theory, and the students recruited for university study were so little prepared for even intermediate-level work, that eventually China would no longer possess the expertise even to understand and adapt foreign technical developments. There would not even be a new generation of competent technicians or practitioners of applied science.

From all evidence, the moderate leaders’ concerns were justified. As a result of the radicals’ reforms, a fair proportion of the teaching

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21 There were some moves after 1971 to buy and adapt advanced technology and scientific know-how from abroad, rather than rely upon China’s own efforts to develop them. However, these new import schemes were opposed by the more extreme radicals from Shanghai.
time at universities—more than just the initial half year—was devoted to efforts to bring many of the new enrollees up to the point where they could begin basic college-level courses. At Tsinghua University, the mathematics teachers were having to spend the whole of each freshman year—perhaps longer—reteaching simple arithmetic to entrants who could not add fractions.\textsuperscript{22} Within another 2-2\frac{1}{2} years these students would be graduating in their specialities. It was scant time to master their professional training, made scantier by the fact that during their 3-3\frac{1}{2} years of university course-work, the students were scheduled to devote 30 per cent of their time to labor and political study.\textsuperscript{23}

Moreover, the university faculties were disturbed by the quality and character of the academic portion of the curriculum. Since the universities had entered the political limelight, there was special pressure from the radicals to let workers and peasants take the rostrums to do some of the teaching. In addition, many of the college labs had been closed and replaced by campus-run workshops, so that the students would not be divorced from industrial labor. Educators began complaining openly that the course-work, rather than abiding by Mao's formula for cognition—"practice, theory, practice"—had turned into "practice, practice, practice, with no theory."\textsuperscript{24} Increasingly these worries of the professors were shared even by the Party men who ran the schools. The deputy Party secretary of Canton's Sun Yat-sen Medical School took the risk of arguing in a national newspaper in 1972 that it was folly to teach only the purely practical.\textsuperscript{25} He wrote that he had rightly been alerted by his faculty to the dangers implicit in having students make out prescriptions and carry out operations without an adequate understanding of pharmacology or anatomy.

The ineptness of the new university graduates was becoming obvious outside the campuses, starting with the first graduating class in 1974,\textsuperscript{26} and this recognition helped the moderates develop wider support for their demands that university curricula and enrollment procedures be revamped again. By 1975 they felt ready to push through

\textsuperscript{22} Told to an interviewee who visited Tsinghua University in 1975; also see Peking Review, September 3, 1971, p. 10.

\textsuperscript{23} At Peking University, according to foreign students formerly there, during the three-year curriculum (later 3\frac{1}{2} years) the labor included three months in the army, three on a factory production line and three at the university farm.

\textsuperscript{24} Canton Radio, in FBIS, February 9, 1976, p. H9.

\textsuperscript{25} Kuang-ming Daily, December 6, 1972, pp. 1-2.

\textsuperscript{26} This was the strong impression of people I interviewed who had been factory personnel. See also People's Daily, October 23, 1977.
such changes. They already controlled most of the levers of power in China. Education and the mass media were two of the remaining sectors where the radicals still maintained political dominance, but even here the moderates had made inroads. In January 1975 they had been able to restore the Ministry of Education and place one of their own partisans, Chou Jung-hsin, at the helm. As Minister, Chou was blunt about the radical programs’ failings:

To become an apprentice requires three years to satisfy the requirements; going to a university requires three years to graduate. If we do not need professors and specialists to lecture; if we only talk about practice with no necessity for theory and knowledge; well, if so, I see no necessity for studying at a university. Going to work at a factory is better; and it’s three years either way.

Chou Jung-hsin’s efforts inevitably met resistance from the radical camp in Peking, whose allies had taken control of most of the best-known universities at the end of the Cultural Revolution. With the Education Ministry still weak and its channels of command not yet rebuilt, the moderates found themselves stalemated. As a result, in August 1975 and again in November, half a dozen members of the Tsinghua University Revolutionary Committee—the moderate minority—addressed letters to Mao, apparently hoping that he could be won over to their own perspective or to a neutral stance. Their letters, reportedly relayed to Mao by Teng Hsiao-p’ing, alleged that the students were “not even capable of reading a book” in their own specialities when they left university.

Mao acted in the autumn of 1975, but not as the moderates had hoped. He sent the letters back to Tsinghua, ordered their contents to be made public, and requested the students there to “debate” the subject. Almost simultaneously, the main radical spokesman in educational affairs, Chih Ch’un (who had become head of Tsinghua University’s governing committee), released on Tsinghua’s campus the compiled speeches of the Education Minister, Chou Jung-hsin.

The Tsinghua students responded with a prodigious volume of

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27 Ming Pao, September 1, 1977.
28 Japanese reporters were told this officially at Tsinghua in December 1975 (Kyodo radio report in BBC-FE/5095/B11/1).
29 A British writer visiting Tsinghua was told this; see South China Morning Post (Hong Kong), May 1, 1976.
wall-posters condemning both the Tsinghua moderates and the Minister. These condemnations quickly spread to other campuses. At least some of the college students had good reasons to participate. They must have been grateful for an enrollment policy that permitted worker and peasant children of poor education (and the cadres' children) to gain a good portion of the university credentials—and now the moderates were challenging the validity of these credentials. Moreover, such students knew that they would be placed under great pressure if more emphasis were placed on academic performance. They preferred a curriculum they could handle, like the one they were undertaking—with relatively low academic demands, involving a good deal of physical labor, and with success determined by active participation in the students' Youth League and Party branches, rather than by scholarly performance. These university students became willing and emotionally-involved allies of Mao and the Shanghai-based leadership in their drive to topple Chou Jung-hsin.

On cue, the new university student protests were picked up by the national media controlled by the Shanghai faction. These attacks reached a crescendo in early January 1976, in the week before Chou En-lai died. The timing seems to have been anything but coincidental. When Mao had returned those letters to Tsinghua University in November 1975, Chou was already on his deathbed. His condition had left the moderates without a standard-bearer. It had also presented Mao a final opportunity to try to determine the leadership succession.

In retrospect, then, it would appear that Mao had selected the issue of higher education as the focus of a renewed struggle with the moderates over the question of who was to succeed to the leadership. The university students' attacks on Chou Jung-hsin were merely the prelude to efforts to bring down Chou's "backstage boss." By early February 1976, Teng Hsiao-p'ing was under attack on the campuses and in the mass media, among other things for having been behind the demands for sweeping changes in education and scientific research.

But the ailing Mao and the Shanghai radicals behind whom he was throwing his weight did not hold sufficient power at the center of the Party to force Teng into exile. It was already becoming obvious that the moderate faction would control China after Mao's death. It took the massive Tien An Men riots of April 1976—in which huge unorganized crowds of Chou/Teng adherents battled with Peking's
police—to persuade a shaken Politburo majority finally to end the political crisis by dismissing Teng Hsiao-p'ing from his posts.

A half year later, the radical leadership was under arrest. The university-enrollment issue, rather than having helped to secure the succession for them, had in fact been one of the issues that ensured their defeat. The bulk of the military leadership had been uneasy about the army’s lack of sophisticated weaponry and afraid that if the radical prescriptions for education persisted, China would no longer have personnel capable of devising new weapons. Most of the Party bureaucracy was employed, as in any socialist country, with the management of the economy, and they too were apparently worried about the generation of scientific and technical experts that had already been lost to China. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that education was the first policy area to witness a dramatic turnabout following the radicals’ purge.

**BRINGING BACK THE SIXTIES**

Since the autumn of 1977, an educational edifice not far different from the pre-Cultural Revolution school system has been reassembled, brick by brick.\(^{32}\) Once again, entrance examinations count most heavily in determining who will be admitted to universities; and in the search for academically competent applicants, a candidate’s class background is now downplayed to an extent not seen since the mid-1950s.

In one important respect, however, the authorities have not returned entirely to pre-Cultural Revolution practices. In 1978 about 70 per cent of the available undergraduate spots were allotted to young people already working at jobs. The reason for this policy was made clear by the additional stipulation that the maximum age-limit for applicants (25 years) was to be set aside in the cases of young men and women who had been in the final or next-to-last years of senior high school in 1966, when the Cultural Revolution first erupted.\(^{33}\) These were the last groups of young people to have received a quality high school education. Former senior high school students from families of middle-class intellectuals, who had seen their chances for

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further education erased by the decrees of June 1966, were now being offered their second opportunity in full measure.

No longer could work units forward the names of only the local leadership’s nominees. Now all eligible applications had to be forwarded to the university-examination boards, and the recruitments for all the university openings were made province-wide.34 This sharply boosted the chances of the pre-Cultural Revolution high school students, almost all of whom were shipped off to settle in the countryside at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1968-69. They now became eligible to fill the majority of the technical and engineering openings, which in Kwangtung Province accounted for about 70 per cent of all the new university places.35 In the December 1977 entrance examinations these pre-Cultural Revolution senior high school students, though a dozen years out of school, did embarrassingly better than their younger competitors, and reportedly are now quite heavily represented at many of the provincial and national universities.36 It was not until 1979-80 that the young people from this generation were finally eliminated from the enrollment competition under new guidelines setting 28 as the maximum eligible age.37 But the new rules still allow the best of the pre-Cultural Revolution junior high school students to win a disproportionate number of places in the universities. Their nine years of education generally were superior to the ten years that today’s senior high school graduates have spent in the mismanaged schools of the 1970s.

At the same time, and on behalf of the same drive for modernization that has given these older students their chance, there have been efforts to ensure that the academically brightest of today’s teen-

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34 The university entrance regulations for Kwangtung Province have been republished in Huang Ho (Yellow River Magazine) (Hong Kong), No. 5 (March 1978), pp. 24-35. Also see Peking Review, April 21, 1978, pp. 11-15. Three secondary sources with information on the new national directives are China News Analysis, No. 1107, January 27, 1978; Current Scene, XVI, No. 1, pp. 14-16; and Suzanne Pepper, "Education and Revolution: The 'Chinese Model' Revised," Asian Survey (September 1978), pp. 847-90.


36 E.g., People’s Daily, March 3, 1978, p. 4, and People’s Daily, March 11, 1978, p. 4. Acquaintances with relatives in China report this also. For instance, one young woman from the senior-high graduating class of 1966, who had settled in the countryside, has related in letters to Hong Kong that she has been accepted into a teacher’s college on the basis of her examination showing, and that when she arrived at the college in March 1978, she discovered a large majority of her new classmates were age 30-31, like herself.

37 FBIS, May 18, 1979, p. L12.
agiers are accepted into the universities in the pure sciences and math. A new regulation even enables universities to enroll young prodigies before they finish high school. As in the West, the argument has been that the mid- and late-teens are the ages when "receptivity [to new theoretical concepts] is stronger and thinking is more flexible."\textsuperscript{38} On somewhat similar grounds, in the enrollments of 1979-80 the age of 23 was recommended as the ceiling for foreign language majors; and almost all such students are now directly recruited from the graduating high-school classes.

It is likely that the percentage of university enrollees selected directly from the senior high schools, rather than from the workplace, will grow significantly as high-school educations begin to improve once more. But whatever the future enrollment trends, the program of recruiting at least some of the university entrants from among youth already engaged in work seems likely to survive. The news media in China still stresses the value of the experience to be gained from practical work. Thus many of the medical colleges are continuing to give preference to young people who have already had medical experience as barefoot doctors, and the agricultural colleges are expected to continue to recruit primarily from among rural residents who have had some labor experience.\textsuperscript{39}

In fact, if the current line on higher education persists, recruitment will probably become divided into three distinct and separate processes: direct enrollments from high schools for the theoretical disciplines and language majors; off-the-job enrollments through examinations for the rather larger numbers of technical, practical, and liberal arts/social science courses; and for certain specified fields, off-the-job enrollments based largely on the work experience of applicants and the needs of their localities.\textsuperscript{40} Of all the "new-born things" of post-Cultural Revolution schooling, only this program of intervening work seems scheduled to last.

As China returns to pre-Cultural Revolution recruitment practices in other respects, however, the leaders are confronting the same political conundrums that they faced in the 1960s. In that earlier era the children of the intelligentsia won a disproportionate number of seats in the universities by performing best on the selection examinations. Now, under policies which stress examination results even more

\textsuperscript{38} NCNA, October 22, 1977, in Ming Pao, October 23, 1977.
\textsuperscript{40} The 1979-80 enrollment directives hint that such a tripartite policy is already becoming formally recognized in practice. See, e.g. FBIS, May 17, 1979, p. L17.
heavily, students from such homes seem to be gaining an even greater percentage of the openings than they did in those earlier times. This does not necessarily mean, though, that the absolute number of "proletarian" children getting into the universities has declined. As part of the crash program for modernization, the total number of enrollments at the university level has been substantially increased: in 1979 the nationwide university student body was some 27 per cent larger than it had been in 1965-66 (the last year before the Cultural Revolution). In early 1979, moreover, the State Council specified that an additional hundred and sixty-nine universities would be established.

But seven million students graduated from high school in 1979, and only 5 per cent of that number can get into a university. Already, disappointed university candidates have staged angry demonstrations in Peking, arguing they had done well enough on the exams to be admitted. In the future, as the present rapid university expansion inevitably slows, this competition to enter higher education can be expected to become progressively more fierce. Just as the mid-1960s witnessed a dangerous logjam of students in the senior high schools, the future may see an increasingly serious crisis of unfulfilled expectations among China's urban-educated young people.

That earlier crisis of the 1960s had turned the issue of academic excellence versus redistributive goals into a potent political controversy, with different constituencies ranged on each side. Since the children of the Party officialdom had the very favorable "class" label of "revolutionary-cadre children" (ke-ming kan-pu tsu-nü), large numbers of Party officials in the 1960s had found it in their own families' interests to go along with the notion that "class origins" receive greater weight in admissions procedures. That same issue of whose children will be permitted to pursue the coveted careers in China—and on what grounds—has not been resolved. The drastic prescriptions of the radicals have now been discredited, but as China rebuilds the educational edifice of the 1960s it is drifting already toward a renewed controversy as to how much weight to attach to aca-

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42 FBIS, January 11, 1979, p. E15. Thus, there are now 598 schools of higher education in China. (Kuang-ming Daily, June 28, 1979, p. 2.)
45 Jonathan Unger, Anita Chan, and Stanley Rosen, "Students and Class Warfare, Part I."
demic achievement as against class origins. It is very probable that
difficult political troubles over the universities' recruitment policies
lie ahead.

University of Kansas, U.S.A., November 1979

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46 E.g., see Peking Review, July 28, 1978, pp. 18-19. Also Canton Radio, June 23, 1978 (FBIS,
June 27, 1978, p. H1), which reports that "some people have levelled accusations against last
year's enrollment work. They babbled 'Last year's exams took care of the urban areas and mal-
treated the rural areas'; 'stress was placed on intellectuals and the good-class peasants were re-
jected'; and 'selection of the best means that in the face of exam marks everyone is unjustly equal regardless of
class origins.'" Party cadres whose children had failed to get into universities were accused by
Canton Radio of spreading such slogans.