Bending the School Ladder: The Failure of Chinese Educational Reform in the 1960s

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A great many of the school systems of the late-developing countries are beset by what R. P. Dore has called the “diploma disease.”¹ In these Third World countries, students are anxious for paper credentials in education sufficiently good to give them a chance for a job in the modern economic sector. Schooling becomes primarily a competition to climb high enough on the school ladder to secure such credentials, and the students’ efforts from primary school through junior and senior high school become glued to “prepping” for a succession of entrance examinations. The reputations of schools and also the careers of teachers become dependent on their students’ rate of success, and so they, too, become parties to this single-minded cramming.

In much of the Third World the end results of such a structure of schooling can, as Dore points out, be crippling. Without enough modern-sector jobs or school places to go around, the great majority of students spend years drilling for examinations most of them will never pass, and they are trained in rote “skills” having little relation to their own later lives. In the process of their schooling they will learn to view the most common occupations of their society with disdain, and then as “failures” they will be consigned to those very occupations.

A number of countries have attempted to devise alternatives to this type of “regular” educational track. The “business schools” of Ghana, the “prevocational studies” of Sri Lanka, the agricultural primary-school program in Tanganyika up to 1960—the list is too lengthy to enumerate in full here. But these efforts seem largely to have failed. Knowing that their countries’ modern-sector employers give preference to job applicants who had been “good” enough to stay on the regular academic route, the vocational programs’ students all too frequently have held onto dreams of somehow rejoining the regular educational track at the next higher level. Under pressures from the students, even the curricula of alternative schooling has often been distorted in the direction of the next higher level’s general-education matriculation examinations.


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The Chinese experience will be of interest here. There are parallels, for in the 1960s China had a school system which resembled somewhat the educational structures of other late-developing countries. Entrance examinations helped determine which of the students were able to enter each higher level of education; the competition among students was tight; and Chinese high schools, especially those in the cities, competed to attain a high university entrance rate. Success in this earned the school a high reputation.

From the late 1950s through the mid-1960s, China promoted two separate schemes to move parts of its school system out of the orbit of the country's regular 12-year school track. The first of these Chinese efforts was a rural half-farming/half-study program, and the second was an urban 10-year experimental curriculum. Both were attempted in a major way. But it had become obvious by the eve of the Cultural Revolution in 1966 that neither of these attempted reforms could succeed on its own terms. They were stymied by their need to compete at a comparative disadvantage against the 12-year system. The reasons they failed to compete are complex and, perhaps, tell us something extra about the difficulties of establishing programs at variance with any nation's regular educational ladder.

We shall observe these difficulties in the following pages. We shall also see how certain aspects of the two Chinese reforms became, in ways not quite envisioned by their original proponents, points of inspiration for the radicals within the Chinese Communist party, and as such became touchstones for Chinese educational policy after the Cultural Revolution.

The documentation available from Guangdong Province and its capital city, Canton, is better than for the rest of China, and so throughout this discussion our attention will focus on that corner of south China. My data will be drawn from Canton's daily press and magazines, from China's national news media, and from interviews conducted in Hong Kong during 1975–76 with several dozen former teachers and students from Guangdong.

The Dilemma of Urban versus Rural: The Solution of the Half-Farming/Half-Study Schools

The Chinese revolution had come to power with twin goals: to (a) modernize China and (b) redistribute opportunities in favor of the masses of workers and peasants and their children. As a result, the Chinese Ministry of Education throughout the fifties and early sixties had been under pressure to satisfy two different demands: to produce contingents of highly trained experts for the modernization program and to provide for greatly broadened mass education. But the funds available for educa-

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tion were limited, and painful choices between these two demands con-
tantly had to be made.

This largely became a question of whether the cities or the coun-
tryside should receive the bulk of the educational expenditures. By the
mid-1960s cities like Canton had already established a solid mass edu-
cation, with schooling universalized not only through primary school but
through junior high school as well. The best senior high schools were
concentrated in the cities; the great majority of the youths going on to
university were from the cities. In the Chinese countryside, meanwhile, as
of 1965 upward of 30 million school-aged children were still without any
primary education whatsoever.2

The administrators in charge of the national educational policy were
perhaps sympathetic to the educational needs of the countryside; at the
very least they vociferously claimed to be. Yet even during periods when
the government pursued rural-oriented policies, as in the Great Leap
Forward, state funds did not pour into the countryside to expand the
rural school systems. (This consistently has remained the case up to the
present day.)

This urban bias in educational funding seems to have derived from
several fiscal calculations:

1. The cities already possessed a developed educational infrastruc-
ture. To develop a large rural educational program would be expensive
and the returns would be slow.

2. The government's First Five-year Plan in the 1950s had specified
that large numbers of specialists would be required by the modernizing
economy. These demands took precedence in budget decisions over the
plans for rural mass education, which could claim less direct benefits to
the economy. As of the early 1960s, fully 60 percent of China's education
funds were being put into secondary and university programs.3 On a
cost-effective basis, it paid to devote the greatest attention to the urban
high school systems, since the urban students from literate homes tended
to be considerably better academically than the rural teenagers.

3. Perhaps the most telling fiscal argument was that the government
had to support these higher schools out of public funds. However,
Chinese agriculture is organized into local peasant production cooperati-

called "teams" which control the proceeds from their own harvests;4
so the state could try to get the peasants to tap these local collective funds

2 Renmin Ribao [People's daily] (May 18, 1965).
3 Zhongguo Xinwen [China news] (May 31, 1964). Between 1949 and 1962, while both secondary
school and university enrollments increased sixfold, primary school enrollments went up only four
times (Xinhua She [September 24, 1962], in Survey of the Chinese Mainland Press [SCMP], no. 2828, p.
13).
4 Jonathan Unger, "Collective Incentives in the Chinese Countryside: Lessons from Chen Vil-

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to erect their own village schools. With the central government always hard pressed for funds, this solution has appealed strongly to all factions in the leadership. Early on, "self-reliance" became a government slogan for village education.

The question that remained to be settled was the shape such locally financed education should take. As a means of reducing local costs, from the early 1950s onward various forms of "irregular," inexpensive, locally sponsored schools for peasant children had been established outside the regular state-run school system. When during the Great Leap Forward a massive drive was launched to expand rural education, much of the effort went into enlarging the boundaries of this "irregular" type of schooling. Especially prominent play was given to a system of newly devised half-farming/half-study secondary schools.

First appearing in March 1958, these half-and-half schools spread rapidly throughout the rural districts. By 1960 2.9 million students were enrolled, fully 27 percent of the junior high school enrollment in China. These were tiny, scattered, hastily improvised schools that averaged only three teachers apiece. But their patent advantage was that their student bodies, by laboring part time on school-managed lands, could provide the wherewithal to help finance their own schooling. Hence, even though this new half-and-half system initially was opposed by cautious ministry personnel, it subsequently won their acceptance as a means for achieving rural mass education with a minimum of financial problems. At the same time there was strong radical support for this new half-and-half program, in that it integrated labor into schooling, fulfilling the Leap's dream of melding "manual with mental."

Similar to the half-and-half agricultural secondary schools were the even greater numbers of new part-time primary schools. Often called "simplified primary schools," they offered just a couple of daily classes taught by locally recruited teachers, usually themselves only primary school graduates. As with the half-and-half secondary schools, their facilities were often crude: a hastily erected shack or the floor of a barn.

These locally inaugurated programs faltered and then collapsed as a severe economic depression (1960–62) followed on the heels of the Leap's economic errors. With village governments straining their resources simply to prevent serious malnutrition, these new primary

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5 In point of fact, the radical group that strongly influenced educational policy after the Cultural Revolution until the death of Mao (1968–76) revamped rural education in ways that pushed even more of the financial burden onto the localities. The villages now have to bear the major expenses for all of China's village primary schools, not just for some.

6 "Irregular" is a Chinese term (bu-sheng-gui) denoting, sometimes with disdain, that a school does not conform to the curricula or meet the standards established by the state's education bureaus.

schools looked to many village officials like an unneeded luxury. Many parents agreed. With the government again permitting the peasants to raise livestock and engage in private cottage industries, even their small children could earn much-needed money by staying home. The half-and-half secondary schools, for their part, had been able to expand rapidly during the utopian Great Leap Forward, partly because the necessities of life, such as food, had been temporarily distributed free of charge. Once the depression struck, the free food distributions stopped, and many of the students dropped out of school to take up full-time work in their production team's fields (at about 70 percent of a full adult wage). Unlike state-run schools, the half-and-half schools were financially dependent on this teenage labor, and the schools fell apart when their enrollments declined.

Thus by 1964 the original state-run primary and secondary schools comprised the great majority of the surviving rural facilities. These state-financed schools were often located in the commune market towns and county capitals rather than in peasant villages per se. They were similar to their urban counterparts, with their curricula oriented toward the entrance examinations of the next-higher levels of schooling. In the 1960s there seems to have been growing disquiet in official circles about this curriculum, especially at the secondary school level. Only a small percentage of the rural secondary school graduates were succeeding in getting into a university, and for all those who did not get admitted there were few jobs available outside of farming. In the 1950s such students had normally been employed in the rural administrative infrastructure, but these county and commune staff positions had gradually been filled and overfilled. China's urban enterprises had simultaneously become overstaffed, to such an extent that the state erected residence barriers in 1958 to prevent any further influxes of rural job seekers into the cities. As a result, increasing numbers of the graduates of rural high schools in the 1960s were being forced back into the villages from which they had come.

Complaints began cropping up in the press over the discontent and maladjustment of such youths to rural life. In these circumstances the

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8 E.g., in one village cited by the press, children could earn half or more of an adult's income by minding the private pigs and geese (Guangming Ribao [Guangming daily] [October 15, 1965]).

9 Five-sixths of the agricultural half-and-half schools had folded by 1962, and the system's enrollments were only a ninth of what they had been in the Great Leap Forward. Nationally, attendance at primary schools dropped from 80 percent of all school-aged children in 1958 to 56 percent in 1962, due largely to the collapse of most of the "irregular" rural primary classes (Summary of China Mainland Magazines, no. 836, p. 15). By early 1964 78 percent of all the rural primary schools were of the type run and financed directly by the government (Zhongguo Xinwen [May 31, 1964]).

10 E.g., Nanfang Ribao [Southern daily] (August 24, 1962), p. 3, which also recommended that students be better prepared through "political education" for their inevitable return to village jobs. In addition, the report criticized some of the rural schools, saying that "their success at getting students into the next higher level of education is the only thing these schools are concerned about, with the consequence that the education in these schools is somewhat abstracted from reality."
national educational authorities became increasingly alert to the “diploma disease” problems that were outlined at the beginning of this paper. They began to hint in editorials that an educational framework better suited to rural life ought to be established. The failed half-and-half experiment seemed to provide a ready-made solution.

The ministries of education and agriculture saw the revival of such a program as resolving three major questions simultaneously: (i) how to detach most of rural education from the urban university-oriented educational ladder, since the countryside was the “weak link” in that system; (ii) how to reorient the rural students’ expectations and attitudes; and (iii) how to provide the manpower skills needed by the villages. In August 1964, the Party Central Committee passed a directive sponsored by Liu Shaoqi calling for a resurgence of the half-farming/half-study schooling.

When a campaign for a new program is seriously mounted in China the speed with which organizational results are accomplished can be astounding. With the officials of each county, commune, and village pressed by the party to organize whatever such schooling they could, and with an economically reviving countryside hungry for increased educational opportunities, there was a veritable explosion in the number of half-and-half schools in rural Guangdong, as can be seen in table 1. Within 1½ years, a fifth of all the primary school children in Guangdong Province and a third of all the secondary school students were enrolled in these new “irregular” part-time rural schools.11

But a glance at table 1 also reveals that by May 1965 or even earlier, the expansion in the simplified primary school system had tapered off. Since primary school-aged children could not generate any real proportion of their school’s revenues through student labor, such schooling remained too expensive for Guangdong’s poorest villages. At least a quarter of the province’s rural children remained outside any sort of primary classes.12 The irony was that the best-off villages also tended to be the ones already possessing government-financed schools. The new programs persuaded the middle range of villages to foot their own school programs and left the poorest villages unwilling to participate.

Even in this broad middle range of villages, where there was a rush to enroll children, it seems from my interviews in Hong Kong with former rural schoolteachers that the parents did not view education as of great

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11 Canton Radio (January 5, 1966); in News from the Chinese Provincial Radio Stations (NCPRS) (United Kingdom).
12 This estimate is derived by combining two sources: New China News Agency (February 19, 1966) notes that Guangdong’s countryside contained 80+ percent of the province’s populace, and Canton Radio (October 20, 1965) (NCPRS) observed that because of the new irregular schooling, the percentage of school-aged children in Guangdong attending primary school had risen the past year from 69 to 80 percent. Since all of the province’s urban children attended primary school, we may deduce that at least 25 percent of the rural children, by these figures, did not.
TABLE 1
EXPANSION IN GUANGDONG’S “IRREGULAR” RURAL SCHOOLS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Simplified Primary Schools (N)</th>
<th>Half-and-Half Agricultural Secondary Schools (N)</th>
<th>Agricultural Labor Universities (N)*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>End of 1959†</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>875</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(70,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961–62‡</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(14,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1963§</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(15,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1964: Central Committee’s “two systems” directive</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>774</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 1964†</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>(70,000)</td>
<td>(5,000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1964‡</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,000+</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 1965**</td>
<td></td>
<td>(80,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May 1965‡†</td>
<td>36,000</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 1965‡†</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 1965§§</td>
<td>36,000+</td>
<td>1,350</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1,234,000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 1965††</td>
<td>37,900</td>
<td>2,629</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15,600 adjoining classes</td>
<td>(197,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(1,390,000)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 1966*#</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>...</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(20,000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE.** — Numbers in parentheses are numbers of students.
* These rural half-and-half labor universities were run by districts and counties. Modeled on the Jiangxi Province network to which Mao had given strong support during the prior years of depression, they received students nominated by the party branches of their local units and sent the graduates back to these same units—what was called the “from the commune, to the commune” policy. After the Cultural Revolution, this policy and its slogan were trumpeted as “newborn things of the Cultural Revolution”; but like many Cultural Revolution innovations, it was already rooted in a pre—Cultural Revolution program.

† *Shang You* (January 25, 1960).
‡ *Zhongguo Xinwen* (January 19, 1966).
† Yangcheng Wanbao (October 19, 1965).
# Canton Radio (October 6), in NCPRS.
** Canton Radio (February 21, 1965), in NCPRS.
†† Canton Radio (October 20, 1965), in NCPRS.
‡‡ *Xing Dao Ribao* (August 8, 1965), citing Peking’s *Guangming Ribao*.
§§ *Yangcheng Wanbao* (October 19, 1965); also *Wen Hui Bao* (October 12, 1965), p. 3.
## *Zhongguo Xinwen* (January 19, 1966); also *Wen Hui Bao* (November 21, 1965).
### Canton Radio (January 5, 1966), in NCPRS. Guangdong’s total rural population in early 1966 was 34 million.

economic advantage to their children. But a respect for education has deep roots in China, and the peasantry of these somewhat better-off districts could afford to see schooling as a desired commodity in its own right: their sons (girls were enrolled much less frequently) would be better men for being able to read and write. In the richer districts, this view seems to have created a “bandwagon” effect even in terms of enrollments in the half-and-half secondary schools.

The initial hopes expressed in Chinese news editorials for this new half-and-half program resembled the type of schooling many of the edu-

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cational reformers in the Third World advocate. Like them, the Chinese were concerned to redirect the teenagers' course work and expectations back toward their own villages. The schools' financial need to have the students do farm labor dovetailed nicely with this. To take advantage of this labor, the curricula of the schools were adapted to the agricultural cycles of the local district, with the students at their desks during slack seasons and in the fields when the peak agricultural seasons arrived. Additional work usually was interspersed with schooling, with laboring and studying reserved for alternate days, or mornings against afternoons, or in weekly rotation.

The proposed school curriculum was supposed to contain some of the usual junior high school subjects, such as the regular Chinese language course. But the math was to be linked to surveying techniques and bookkeeping, and the chemistry and biology were to be geared to lessons in soil characteristics, fertilizer application, seed culture, and crop protection. Most of these school lessons were to be tied directly into the fieldwork. The teacher was supposed to interrupt the labor sessions to point out improved techniques and was supposed to bring classes out into the fields during class periods to conduct crop experiments. Those were, at least, the hopes.

The party leadership was in agreement on the desirability of this type of curriculum and the fiscal benefits of half-and-half schooling. But the radical party intellectuals, unlike some of their colleagues in the leadership, believed that labor within the schools would have an additional important merit—an ethical import. Whereas in Marx it is the methodical rigor of industrial work which helps shape proletarian consciousness, with the Chinese leftists it is simply the sweat and tempering of hard labor. For this, the countryside is even more appropriate than the factory. A 1965 province-wide conference in Guangdong on half-and-half schools thus instructed that even agricultural secondary schools in overcrowded districts which had no real need for extra labor "should seriously organize the students to participate in labor, for the purpose of achieving transformed men." 13 (Post—Cultural Revolution labor was to be structured around this same notion and often had few educational or economic benefits attached.)

With the more "Maoist" wing of the party throwing its weight behind such concepts, selected parts of the regular full-time educational structure began to be shifted toward the half-and-half program. In mid-1965 it was announced that all the full-time agricultural senior high schools, which had been devised in the image of Russian schools, would be converted into half-and-half schools, and the university-level agricultural

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institutes began following suit. By the close of 1965 nearly 10,000 students at other types of institutes in Peking had also adopted the half-and-half structure, with engineering students put to work in factories both on campus and off.

In the rural half-and-half schools, however, this concept of intermingling labor with studies did not enjoy an entirely enthusiastic response from the peasants. The peasants' view of their children's education was, like the peasants' view of physical labor, rather more mundane than the party philosophers'. The primary benefits of the half-and-half system to rural parents were the lower costs and the greater availability of school places. But the labor was not often seen by parents (if we may be permitted to read between the lines of media reports of that period) as either morally invigorating or as improving their children's agricultural skills. What they saw instead was that the children had less schooling than in the regular junior high schools. Worse yet, the students had to spend time doing free work for the school, which the parents could otherwise put profitably to use on the family's own private endeavors. Tussles between the peasant parents and the schools sometimes ensued, with the parents wanting the schools to pay at least something for the work and the schools (and the state behind them) wanting to reduce educational costs by securing the students' labor free.

Some parents felt, too, that they were paying for second best, that what counted in education were the academic skills of increased literacy, math, and so forth—among other things, the skills legitimized by the regular schools—and that when it came to transmitting such academic knowledge and skills, the poor quality of teachers at the new schools and the reduced time allocated to academic studies led to mediocre results. If possible, they wanted more of a "regular" education for their children, as defined by the curricula and educational concerns of the "regular" schools.

The half-and-half schools, being locally initiated and financed and therefore swayed by local opinion, tended to respond somewhat to such parental complaints. This was particularly the case since, as the Chinese press itself kept admitting, these opinions were shared by many of the teachers at the new schools and by many administrators in the lower

14 Zhongguo Xinwen (August 22, 1965); Peking Review (January 7, 1966). This switch to half-and-half schooling was decided at a conference of the Ministry of Agriculture attended by both Mao and Liu Shaoqi (Renmin Ribao [August 24, 1965]). Nationally, more than half the agricultural universities had adopted the half-and-half program by the end of 1965.

15 E.g., Wen Hui Bao (Hong Kong) (January 4, 1966).


17 E.g., a Nanfang Ribao report (July 7, 1965) observed that "some rural people hold up these schools to ridicule, saying that they are 'low-class' and 'irregular,' 'could not guarantee the quality of teaching' and 'would soon be suspended.'"

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echelons of the educational bureaucracy. The teachers feared that their own status suffered because the status of their schools compared badly with the regular schools, and the administrators were concerned with "standards" and afraid that the education system in their districts was slipping away out of "proper" educational control. In keeping with the combined preferences of teachers, lower officials, and parents, many of the half-and-half schools began to edge toward (or tried to adopt from the start) the type of "regular" education that the full-day schools provided.

The provincial authorities found themselves trapped between their own initial hopes for village-oriented schooling and their need to make the half-and-half schools more credible to parents as real centers of education. For instance, for Guangdong Province to have officially denied the rural students access to the regular educational ladder would have been tantamount to verifying their inferior educational status. Accordingly, even though very few of the rural half-and-half secondary school students had either the financial resources or the hopes of going on to further education, Guangdong had had to provide from the very first that "graduates from [half and-half] agricultural secondary schools may sit the entrance examinations to go to senior high schools and universities." But such a regulation had had the effect of throwing the half-and-half schools into direct comparison with the regular schools. And in terms of the standards of classroom teaching which the half-and-half schools actually ended up providing (very often abbreviated versions of the core courses taught at the regular junior high schools, plus a course on "agricultural knowledge"), the half-and-half schools were inferior, as even the articles in the mass media implicitly acknowledged. The course work in the half-and-half schools, trying simultaneously to accommodate two different goals, was falling short on both: neither sufficiently oriented toward the half-and-half program's purported purpose of supplying only knowledge useful in rural life nor able to provide a proper education as defined by the regular schools.

By the time of the Cultural Revolution the half-and-half structure had gained the opposition of the "Maoists," who attacked the program in their essays not because of any intrinsic drawbacks in the system but, rather, because the broader educational milieu in which it operated had led so many of these schools to move away from the hopes the party's

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18 The national press complained about such lower-level educational officials: "They contend that schools can be opened only in places with good educational conditions and that it is impossible to extend education in a poor mountain valley. . . . They only want to operate regular full-day schools which they consider 'up to standard.' They do not want to operate simplified schools which they consider as 'not being in fine shape,' inefficient, and having lowered the 'quality' of teaching and upsetting the school system" (Remin Ribao [June 2, 1964])

19 New China News Agency (June 10, 1964).

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radicals had placed in them. They seem to have felt that the half-and-half system could only succeed if all the schools were converted to half and half—if the paradigm provided by the full-time schools disappeared. They believed that it was this comparison which caused students and parents to see the half-and-half program's extensive schedule of labor as a "price" that they had to pay—a price that the parents could see the preferred full-day schools largely doing without. The issue, as the radicals came to see it, was that Liu Shaoqi and company were using the half-farming/half-study program as an inexpensive sop to the laboring classes. As a Cultural Revolution essay put it, "His 'two types of educational systems' was but a reprint of the 'double-track system' of the capitalist countries, of 'education for the talented' and 'education for the laborers.'" 20

In short, party radicals had concluded that the program had—purposely—been second best in a two-halved structure and had been poisoned as a result. Their attack was on the idea that Chinese education could "walk on two legs." The radicals in effect denied the possibility and, even before the Cultural Revolution, had demanded an end to China's full-day schools. 21 Reforms of education, they believed, could only take place in an environment dominated by those reforms. It was a notion they were to pursue, along with the large doses of labor associated with the half-and-half schools, even in the post—Cultural Revolution cities of China.

Experimental Schools and the Strategy of Compressed Curricula

The second major form of new schooling in the 1960s was the "10-year experimental school" which, like the half-and-half system, had grown out of efforts to introduce a less expensive means of education. As we shall see, this 10-year structure, again similar to the half-and-half program, became bent through competition with the regular educational ladder. Once more like the half-and-half system, it was to be transformed by party radicals and used as one of the bases for post—Cultural Revolution education.

During the Hundred Flowers of the spring of 1957 and again during the Great Leap, there had been debate as to whether the course of study


21 In the winter of 1965, the radicals had pressed to have the whole system of urban schooling converted to half-and-half, but the "moderates" had managed to deflect the proposal through a "gradualist" compromise under which it would require 15 years to effect the conversion (the conference decision is discussed in the Hong Kong Communist newspaper, *Da Gong Bao* [December 6, 1965], and in Donald Munro, "Maxims and Realities in China's Educational Policy: The Half-Work, Half-Study Model," *Asian Survey* [April 1967], p. 257; an accusation on Liu's "delaying tactic" at this conference is contained in *SCMP*, no. 4118).
in Chinese schools could be made shorter. The People's Republic had inherited a system of 12-year schooling based on American practices, and the model that was pointed to as preferable was the socialist schooling of the Soviet Union. Russia had been using a 10-year primary/secondary school program since the 1930s, but Chinese attention was caught anew by Khrushchev's well-publicized reforms of Soviet schools in 1958 and the new talk in Soviet educational circles about the possibilities of teaching children at a more rapid rate and a higher level of difficulty. As we shall observe, different groupings in the Chinese Communist party extracted from these Russian ideas quite different messages on what a compressed curriculum and faster learning entailed. But there was broad agreement that a primary/secondary school curriculum shortened to 9 or 10 years might provide a solution to the same fiscal problem that the half-and-half schools had sought to resolve: how to provide a widened mass education without having to cut back on higher education. If the school curriculum could be shortened by 20 percent, that meant, after all, that 20 percent more students could be passed through the available classrooms and teachers with little extra cost.

In keeping with this idea, the various party leaders had convinced themselves, probably to an exaggerated degree, that China's 12-year educational curriculum contained a large amount of "waste" which, if remedied, could cut years off the regular course work without ill effect: textbooks could be made somehow clearer, leaner, and simpler; courses could be "streamlined" and their "unimportant" lessons deleted; the more minor courses could be merged or cut out altogether.

Again akin to the half-and-half program, this proposed 10-year compressed system initially also was meant to provide schooling that did not unduly interfere with the labor potential of teenagers. Vice-Premier Lu Dingyi, who at the time was concurrently head of the party's propaganda bureaus and chief party spokesman on educational affairs, was arguing enthusiastically that children possessed the innate intellectual capacity to begin their primary-school experiences at 6 rather than the customary age of 7, and through a 9- or 10-year course could graduate from senior high school at the ages of 15–17. Lu Dingyi seemed to be arguing that freeing all youths entirely from secondary school at the point when their studies would have entered the 10-year system would have been a serious mistake. But if the 7-year system could be compressed to 6 years, the 12-years system to 10, to what extent might the 10-year system be fit to try to accommodate the requirements of a 10-year system?
labor value became mature could take the place of having youths working part time and studying part time for a few extra years.

In the Great Leap period, Lu Dingyi and his associates had thrown their support behind half-and-half schooling, but they had seen it as a temporary expedient. They remained resolutely opposed to the radicals' notion of swinging wholesale toward half-and-half education. Their concern was to retain a quality education that could feed readily into high-level tertiary training so as to be able to produce a new generation of high-quality technocrats. But at the same time, like the party radicals, they were aiming to enlarge greatly the student population to bring in more of the workers' and peasants' children. The experimental 10-year schooling was to be an effort to combine what they considered to be high-quality academic training with universalization, an expectation which was to prove quite at odds with the outlook of the party's "Maoists."

For one thing, their views on the purposes of education diverged considerably. Lu Dingyi and the education minister, Yang Xiufeng, seem to have represented a strain of party thinking which was entranced with "science." They felt that the route to China's development lay largely through "modernization" and improved expertise, requiring more advanced manpower-training programs. Nowhere was this perspective propounded more clearly than in a brace of speeches the two men delivered to a session of the Second National People's Congress in 1960, in which they itemized their hopes for the newly devised 10-year experiments. To read speeches such as that of Education Minister Yang is, at certain points, to hear echoes of the American dreams for education following Sputnik. Yang was proposing that the 10-year curriculum should so stress the hard sciences and math that it would be possible to "transfer downward" into the proposed 10-year secondary schools a number of university-level subjects: not only analytic geometry and differential and integral calculus, but also the study of transistorization, nuclear physics, rare elements, and heavy atomic particles!

This type of education was not just to be for a small group of elite students preparing for university education but, rather, for an eventual dreamed-of production of 10 million senior high graduates per year. Since science and technological know-how would, they believed, pave China's road to modernity, it would be useful for all of the younger generation of Chinese to be able to comprehend and apply sophisticated

25 Speaking during the Great Leap in support of an accelerated 10-year curriculum, for example, Lu Dingyi had declared that in the long term "I am in favor of changing all secondary schools to a full-day system; we must not develop half-work/half-study" (cited in Jiaoyu Geming [Educational revolution] [May 6, 1967]; English translation in Revolutionary Education in China, ed. Peter Seybolt [White Plains, N.Y.: IASP, 1973], p. 35).

26 Renmin Ribao (April 9, 1960; and April 10, 1960).
scientific concepts. They thought of it as a forward-looking vocational training, as it were.

At the opposite end of the spectrum of views in the party stood Mao and a group of radical followers who were to become influential in education after the Cultural Revolution of 1966–68. While Lu Dingyi and Yang Xiufeng had wanted to transform mass education into the image of an expertise-oriented elite education, the Maoists, conversely, would later transform all education into the image of a mass, terminal, ethics-oriented education, with short shrift paid to the “bourgeois book learning” of the experts. After the Cultural Revolution they would incorporate the idea of an abbreviated curriculum (Canton in the mid-1970s offered a total of only 10 years of schooling) but fitted to their own ideals. Labor—purifying practice—rather than the high-level science and math theory beloved by Lu and Yang was to take the place of honor. Hence, instead of posing the 10-year system against the half-and-half system, as had Lu Dingyi at one point, the Maoists were to combine the concept of fewer years of schooling with the labor-heavy curriculum of the initial half-and-half concept, leaving little time for any academic study at all. Moreover, rather than trying to intensify the learning process, as Lu and Yang had proposed, the radicals were to attempt to simplify drastically what was learned, for the benefit of the working-class children from illiterate homes who had difficulties at school. Schoolwork after the Cultural Revolution was to become a means for leveling differences among youths, not so much a means for modernizing China.

As of 1960, however, Lu Dingyi and Yang Xiufeng still held sway as the party’s spokesmen on education, and 10-year experimental schooling was a project under their own guidance. Cautious men, they proposed that 10 or 20 years of experimentation would be necessary before all of China’s schools could convert to the new compressed model. To carry out these years of testing and refining, they turned as a first step to favorably contrived “keypoint” schools, a normal way of proceeding with innovations in China. Fifty special combined primary/secondary schools would pioneer their 10-year system.

The education departments of both Guangdong Province and Canton each wanted a site under its own jurisdiction, and so in 1960–61 two such special elite experimental points were established in Canton. To secure optimal conditions for attaining a success that would bolster their own department’s prestige, each took to recruiting only students of high ap-

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titude. With fine students provided with experienced teachers and excellent equipment and buildings, the scene was well set to demonstrate the workability of Lu Dingyi’s and Yang X ufeng’s ideas.

However, these two experimental schools did not end up observing the initial proposals for educational reform. Instead, the new schools shortly accommodated themselves to the prevailing educational framework, just as many of the half-and-half rural schools had done.

The problem was that the experimental school system could neither ignore nor attempt to have its students bypass the university entrance examinations. After all, one of the principal goals set for the schools was to legitimize 10-year schools on the grounds of academic accomplishment, and success through this examination system was the criterion by which urban China was accustomed to judging a school’s worth. Yet once committed to competing for high levels of passes, the experimental schools found themselves caught up on China’s regular educational ladder. If an experimental school could not assure its students a likely chance of doing well in these examinations, it would find it more difficult to recruit a good student body, for no young person would select a system of experimental schooling that might prove harmful to his or her own opportunities for further schooling. With those all-crucial university entrance examinations based on the regular senior high course work, the experimental schools would have to adhere more closely to the regular school system’s basic curriculum.

The result was that within only 1 or 2 years of their founding, the experimental schools had become almost replicas of the best 12-year schools of Canton, pursuing a curriculum almost the same as their competitors. The major remaining difference was that they used abbreviated textbooks of the 10-year system’s own devising. These deleted the “frills” of the regular textbooks, that is, deleted the sections which would not turn up on the university entrance examinations. The need to sustain the schools’ reputations and their abilities to attract good students had ended up reshaping the experiment itself.

What the 10-year experimental schools subsequently tried to show was merely that it was possible to compress the curriculum and yet bring students satisfactorily up to the university entrance examination standards. In this the schools did “prove” themselves in Canton. When the first 5-year high school class of the provincial school graduated in 1965, it secured what was reported to be the second highest rate of university admissions of all the high schools of Guangdong.

But the school had in no way shown that a 10-year curriculum was viable for typical senior high students. In point of fact, the provincial school had attained its high university entrance examination scores partly by weeding out and dumping the bottom quarter of its exceptionally
bright student body. It had done so through formal tests halfway through the 5-year curriculum, on the grounds that they were not up to the pace demanded of them by the school’s accelerated program. The school ended up securing a prestigious name but at the price of throwing into question the relevance of its results.

During the period of 1960–62, about half a dozen of Canton’s best 6-year high schools started equivalent 5-year programs in several of their classrooms, and here as much as in the special experimental schools the programs became shaped by the standards established by the regular educational ladder. These schools had wanted to participate in the new innovations in order to boost their own reputations, and they took steps similar to the provincial experimental school. As a teacher from an excellent 6-year-track Shanghai school recalls, “For our school’s accelerated program they chose the best students in the school, since they wanted the school to be famous for having conducted such an experiment successfully.” However, such schools in Canton soon began dropping the program, one after another, beginning as early as 1963–64. Despite their precautions, it appears they had come to the opinion that their programs’ results would not enable them to become more “famous”; sticking to the regular 12-year system would provide higher rates of university admissions and hence safer payoffs to their reputations.

It had not taken long for the 10-year curriculum, as with the half-and-half program, to be defeated by the pull of the 12-year ladder. Curriculum reforms could not readily surmount the broader Chinese educational milieu, where a school’s standing was measured by its success in conforming to the educational standards laid down by higher-school examinations.

This predicament has been summed up in one of the charges against Chinese education leveled during the Cultural Revolution: “The failure to thoroughly carry through educational reforms was due to the fact that the university selection examinations have provided the ultimate ends of the education system.”

Conclusions

In this respect, Chinese education shared in the “diploma disease” that Ronald Dore analyzes in his illuminating study of Third World education. Dore posits, however, that the higher examinations’ dominant influence over education stems from the fact that the modern-sector jobs

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29 From former students at Provincial Experimental, I have obtained data for two of the four classes of the grade that would have graduated in 1966 had not the Cultural Revolution intervened. In one of these classes, only 36 out of 52 students were permitted in 1964 to go on for the 2 years of the experimental school’s senior high, and in the other class only 38 out of 50 were able to continue.

in the Third World are available principally to those students who advance high enough on the academic-track school ladder. Though this undoubtedly is true for much of the Third World, in China the links between diplomas and job opportunities were quite weak. In China's countryside, as we have observed, secondary school diplomas did not provide better jobs; even the full-day senior high graduates had little chance of getting out of the villages permanently. In the cities, the government tried to favor working-class youths by making factory jobs as readily available to junior high as to senior high school graduates. The higher diploma in the cities was not even helpful, let alone necessary, in the competition to get a modern-sector factory job.

The contest for diplomas concerned only a comparatively narrower stratum of young people who were vying to enter a university and a high-level career. All of the students in the elite experimental schools were, of course, of this latter type of student. But even here we have seen that the experimental schools were pushed into the entrance-exam arena in the first place because the education officials felt that they had to demonstrate to the public that the new program could provide as good an education in 10 years as the old system had in 12 years.

In short, both the rural half-and-half schools and the urban experimental schools were pulled back toward the standards set by the higher-school entrance exams and toward the curriculum of the regular academic track because that curriculum and its exam system defined what the public and school staffs took to be the legitimate system of schooling. Neither of these failed reforms could buck that sense of where educational legitimacy and quality lay.

If this generally is the case, educational reforms in the Third World which try to eradicate the “diploma disease” will have to do more than weaken the linkage between academic-track diplomas and job-hiring practices, which is what Dore proposes. Dore is, I think, correct; but any serious reform effort will also have to try to alter the means by which the public is accustomed to judging a school system. And that task, as even the Chinese government discovered, will not be very easily accomplished.

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31 Jonathan Unger, *Education under Mao*, chaps. 1, 2.