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## Reevaluating Chinese Education

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## Essay Review

# Reevaluating Chinese Education

Irving Epstein and John N. Hawkins

*Competitive Comrades: Career Incentives and Student Strategies in China* by Susan Shirk.  
Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982. \$24.00 (cloth).

*Red Guard Factionalism and the Cultural Revolution in Guangzhou [Canton]*  
by Stanley Rosen. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1981. \$32.50 (cloth).

*Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960-1980*  
by Jonathan Unger. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. \$24.00 (cloth).

It has become clear that the Maoist attempts during the Cultural Revolution radically to transform China's education system have met with dramatic failure. In educational terms, the counterrevolution has translated itself into the reestablishment of rigid institutional hierarchy; compulsory testing at every level of instruction; the initiation of degrees, and, in some instances, credit systems at the university level which reorder the value of the curricular capital transmitted; the reassertion of teacher authority in unambiguous terms; and, to accommodate some of the students who will not continue to the university, the creation of vocational training at higher levels of secondary schooling. The question of what went wrong with the Maoist dream and its emphasis on egalitarian development, decentralization of institutional responsibility, and the promotion of inductive investigation and inquiry remains unanswered; with varying degrees of success, each of these three works attempts to answer this central question. While their authors exhibit fundamental differences in approach and intent, they also have a number of views in common.

In the first place, all three authors note the importance of the issue of class background as a contributing factor to the ways in which personal aspiration and motivation were expressed during the pre-Cultural Revolution era. In so doing, they owe a debt of gratitude to Richard Kraus's pioneering research in this area.<sup>1</sup> Briefly, debate during the years preceding the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution centered on the criteria under which one's social class was defined. Was it necessary to stress an individual's

<sup>1</sup> See Richard C. Kraus, *Class Conflict in Chinese Socialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981).

class origins, or the parents' status at the time of Liberation, in order to determine his or her real political orientation? Or should class consciousness, as determined by political activism, be considered the appropriate criterion under which to evaluate true class loyalty? Different elites lined up on opposing sides of the issue. Children whose parents were activist cadres or whose political background was judged acceptable favored the "blood-line" theory of class background, which stressed the importance of one's social origins as the primary criteria under which class background should be evaluated. Children whose parents were intellectuals, nonworker or nonpeasant, and whose political background was judged unacceptable favored the contrary argument which emphasized the importance of class consciousness as demonstrated by one's activism in making these determinations.

Educational policies wavered during the pre-Cultural Revolution era, favoring students belonging to either of the above-mentioned categories at various times. For Shirk, policy ambiguity adversely affected student peer group relationships.<sup>2</sup> For Rosen, the situation served as a pretext for continued Red Guard factionalism during the early years of the Cultural Revolution. And for Unger, the inadequate methods with which these policies were redressed during the Cultural Revolution negatively influenced student motivation and behavioral attitudes toward academic success and further served to destroy educational quality on a systematic basis.

While their points of emphasis differ, there is widespread convergence with respect to a second assumption: the political stance and ideological stridence of particularly articulate elites are seen to vary largely according to their perceived self-interest. Radical ideologues who stressed the importance of political activism and class consciousness as major contributing factors to class background often came from families of middle- and non-revolutionary-class origins. Conservatives, whose parents already were labeled as activists, stressed the importance of blood-line theory. Thus, ideological pronouncement became largely intertwined with the pursuit of self-interest.

It should finally be noted that the three authors rely heavily on interviews with refugees as an information source and that a great number of their informants originally came from Canton, creating questions about the degree to which their claims can be generalized to the country as a whole. The sensitivity and extent to which informant interviewing is successfully utilized vary with each author; Rosen, who is most successful in this area, interviewed over one hundred informants, more than twice the number

<sup>2</sup> These issues have been previously discussed with respect to personal relations in the general sense in Ezra Vogel, "From Friendship to Comradship: The Change in Personal Relations in Communist China," *China Quarterly*, no. 21 (January-March 1965), pp. 46-60.

of the other authors. The factual matter which he did gather nicely complements his judicious use of newspapers and other written material. Shirk, though, uses refugee-interviewing techniques to assess the quality of friendship ties and personal relationships among middle school students in a very general sense. Nonetheless, collectively the three works attest to the potential usefulness of the technique as a data-gathering source.<sup>3</sup>

Susan Shirk's *Competitive Comrades* is not, as Andrew Nathan describes it on the jacket cover, an account of the Chinese secondary educational system in the early 1960s. It is, however, an interesting view of the nature of elite rivalry among student groups attending a few of the best schools in Canton at that time. The author's own caveats concerning the specificity of her case appear contradictory. While we are told, "I do not view this book as an argument against all political efforts at social reform," we are also subjected to vast generalizations such as those which speak of "the failures of revolutionary regimes like those in China" (p. x) in the most sweeping of terms. Innocent readers should therefore beware, for the author would have done well to be consistently more circumspect in her statements.

Shirk distinguishes between meritocratic and what she labels "virtuocratic" (relating closely to the Weberian concept of charisma) forms of succession within the Chinese educational system. Success within the system could be secured by either means. For students whose parents were of middle or unacceptable class background, success depended on their ability to gain academic achievement in the classroom and to pass provincially administered national examinations necessary for obtaining university entrance. For students of appropriate class background but inadequate academic performance, success within the system demanded ability to demonstrate one's political activism, usually through Communist Youth League (CYL) channels. When policies favoring the promotion of activists became pronounced, middle- and poor-class background students felt more pressure to demonstrate their political activism by participating in CYL activities. The stakes were especially high because promotion to the university guaranteed an urban job to the graduate.

Policy ambiguity, which has allowed both meritocratic and virtocratic succession forms to coexist, coincided with official equivocation concerning the issue of class background and created significant tension among peer group members. Thus, when issues concerning the legitimacy of the selection process into the Communist Youth League or the correct methods for judging the sincerity of one's political commitments naturally arose, they often remained unresolved. Because CYL members worked closely

<sup>3</sup> The point is highlighted by the many difficulties Western researchers have encountered attempting to conduct on-site fieldwork within the mainland. See Suzanne Pepper, "Bleak Outlook for Foreign Scholars in China," *Asian Wall Street Journal* (March 9, 1983).

with school teachers and administrators, carrying out administrative tasks as well as reporting to the higher authorities on the activities and mistakes committed by fellow students, often publicized during self-criticism sessions,<sup>4</sup> the degree of peer antagonism which developed was extreme; during the Cultural Revolution, it exploded into Red Guard factionalism.

Shirk's own bias in offering this account is that of an unabashed structural functionalist. She states, "Although the influence of traditional modes of thought on modern life of the Chinese is undeniable, I believe that a policy generated structure is a better starting point for understanding behavior" (p. 6). Thus, student behavior is categorized in rational, mechanistic terms whereby students consciously or unconsciously utilized that strategy they perceived would maximize their comparative advantage in progressively climbing the steps of the educational ladder. It is reported that students from private (*minban*) schools showed more interest in non-academic areas (sports, peers, sexual relationships, etc.), since their incentive to succeed was less pronounced than that of the highly motivated students attending the better schools.

There is much here requiring further clarification, but the author is not as forthcoming as one might expect. A loyal adherence to structural-functional assumptions with respect to the operation of educational institutions is fine, but the substantial Western research, which argues against many of these assumptions, should be mentioned. One wonders, as a matter of principle, whether any system, especially an educational one, can in reality function as close to the meritocratic ideal as is hoped. Within the Chinese context, admission into the university never depended only on examination performance. The initiation of elaborate procedures, whereby students were required to list their institutional choice with each university making its own admissions decisions, often according to non-generalized criteria, created ambiguity in policymaking even during the years when superior academic achievement was most heavily stressed.<sup>5</sup> The assumption that clearly articulated, ordered, and regulated rules of succession are inherently more conducive to the acceptance of authority is open to question. The author reports that even in bad schools those students with poor prospects for achieving academic success accepted the legitimacy of a merit system based on examination (in truth, internalizing their own sense of failure). One intuitively wonders, however, whether or not the politically competitive student, when forced to repeat a year because of poor grades, would accept the legitimacy of the decision with

<sup>4</sup> For a useful discussion of the nature of the self-criticism session within the work place as well as the school, see Martin King Whyte, *Small Groups and Political Rituals in China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

<sup>5</sup> A useful discussion of the reinstitution of these policies in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution is conducted by Suzanne Pepper, "Chinese Education after Mao: Two Steps Forward, Two Steps Back and Begin Again?" *China Quarterly*, no. 81 (March 1980), pp. 1-65.

greater ease than would the good student, excluded from climbing the educational ladder because of poor political credentials.

It is interesting to note that Shirk, while claiming that during the 1960s “even Chinese peasants and their children believed that a context based upon academic achievement provided equality of opportunity . . .” (p. 176), also admits that “cadres articulating the peasantry’s interests raised some objections to university selection procedures and the system of elite key schools at educational conferences in 1978” (p. 192, n. 24). Reasons for the change of opinion are not explained.

Whether or not readers agree with the author’s position favoring meritocratic organizational form, they must accept the contention that educational policy determines student behavior, an assumption at least as problematic. In the first instance, educational policy is mediated, interpreted, and redefined by numerous actors before, during, and after students respond to its effects. It is significant that only three teachers were interviewed, for a total of 9 hours, and it appears that no administrator, school principal, or parent was interviewed for this study. What we have are perceptions of policy formation as viewed by former students and their recollections of their own responses. Few if any American high school and/or university teachers and professors would agree that students possess the sole capability for interpreting and correctly judging the effectiveness of the policies which influenced their educational experiences. Yet this is exactly what the refugee informants are asked to do.

In fact, as the Rosen book documents, specific school policies with respect to promoting academic achievement and/or political activism as criteria for advancement varied from school to school, depending on the school’s reputation, rank, geographical location, and the percentage of students from politically acceptable or unacceptable class family backgrounds. Schools with large numbers of students from politically unacceptable class backgrounds, unable to draw from the city’s total student population for their senior middle-school candidates, had to emphasize academic achievement instead of political activism as the primary criterion for educational advancement.

Aside from the issue concerning generalization of policy, one can take issue with the mechanical view that students behaved according to their self-interest. Noncompetitive activity did not exist in Chinese schools, it seems, except perhaps at the junior middle-school level, at which time the students were too inexperienced to appreciate what was at stake in failing to advance to senior level. Such failure resulted in being sent to the countryside or to private (*minban*) schools where students had little chance of succeeding, if one is to believe the author. What is missing is a respect for the complexity of adolescence. And while Shirk does admit to the existence of cross pressures affecting the students’ calculations of

personal self-interest, this qualification does not detract from the tenor of the general argument. In any event, since most of the informants agreed that personal relations were better developed in the mainland than in Hong Kong (p. 166), in spite of the keen competition for advancement, one wonders how significant the competitive spirit really was? One would have wished Shirk to elaborate on a socialization process which only begins to promote maximizing personal self-interest at the highest levels of the secondary educational system. When do the youth *begin* to ferret out strategies conducive to fulfilling their career goals and why at that particular time? What are the developmental processes by which these changes in perception occur? What are the parameters of such value change? Such issues beg to be elaborated.<sup>6</sup>

Shirk assumes that all curricular and pedagogical issues were presented to students in a straightforward manner: "Whereas the standards for political recognition were subjective and imprecise, judgements of academic excellence were seen as unambiguous. Because Chinese pedagogy has traditionally paid scant attention to original thinking, and still relies on rote learning, the standards of academic success were particularly clear" (p. 108). Realistically, in every classroom situation, teachers and students transmit their own personal strengths and weaknesses in conveying and assimilating given information. Facts in and of themselves are not value free, nor were the communication processes experienced by the respective actors in Chinese schools, regardless of the emphasis placed on rote memorization of facts. The author does not submit details concerning the particulars of curricular syllabi, nor are the contents of the examinations of the achievement-oriented university discussed. Thus, the reader does not know how concepts were presented, ordered, analyzed, and assimilated. Even if one agreed that regularized assessment of academic achievement is desirable, one would still be hard pressed to demonstrate that the transmission of information within the Chinese classroom was as routine and as inherently systematic as the author would have us believe.

One must equivocate when analyzing the usefulness of the research. Because the Cultural Revolution period is not discussed at length, it is difficult to see how pre-Cultural Revolution policies can directly influence post-Cultural Revolution attitudes. One can never discount the existence of factionalism in Chinese politics. Since many of the mid-level functionaries

<sup>6</sup> Little research has been conducted which concerns basic socialization processes at the adolescent stage. At lower levels, though, a great deal of work has been done. See, e.g., Charles P. Ridley, Paul H. B. Godwin, and Dennis Doolin, *The Making of a Model Citizen in Communist China* (Stanford, Conn.: Hoover Institution Press, 1971); Roberta Martin, "The Socialization of Children in China and Taiwan: An Analysis of Elementary School Textbooks," *China Quarterly*, no. 62 (June 1975), pp. 242-62; and R. F. Price, "Chinese Textbooks, Fourteen Years On," *China Quarterly*, no. 83 (September 1980), pp. 535-50.

still in power within the Chinese bureaucracy gained their influence during the Cultural Revolution, the potential for continued conflict among elites on the basis of personal affiliation, as well as legitimate policy difference, remains strong. While the Cultural Revolution era in and of itself may be difficult to analyze, one cannot totally ignore the time frame when tracing historical influences on present policy decisions.

To her credit, Shirk admits to the possibility that informant responses were influenced by gender, geographic, and class-background bias; however, she claims that other data-collecting devices also contain their own biases, and she believes that the large degree of internal consistency of response reaffirms the validity of the interviewing method. Interviewing refugees is often useful for obtaining factual material, especially if one asks specific questions requiring nonattitudinal responses. In this case, however, the small sample size limits the possibility of generalizing too much from the data.

Of vital importance is the status of the informants interviewed. These are people who, for one reason or another, competed in an educational system and lost out. It would seem natural that questions regarding attainment of success, or choosing successful strategies within that system, would play a very important role in their lives. Perhaps it is for this reason that attitudes pertaining to the complexities of youth and adolescence are given short shrift in this study. This is not to imply that the attitudes expressed by a system's "losers" are not significant. But the general validity of their claims can be contested.

In spite of these reservations, there is much which is worthwhile. The nature of peer group relations, of CYL recruitment, and of other organizational activities is intelligently discussed. The delegation of teacher authority to students and the practice of using students to spy on their peers—which continues in both Taiwanese and mainland reformatory institutions—are fascinating and exhibit the paradoxical way in which subservient groups are manipulated and mistrusted by authority figures in Chinese society.

Stanley Rosen's *Red Guard Factionalism and the Cultural Revolution in Guangzhou* [Canton] meticulously chronicles the nature of those intergroup rivalries which emanated from the multiplicity of conflicts existing during the early and mid-sixties and surfaced during the Cultural Revolution. The author's research, which includes a substantial number of informant interviews as well as the use of numerous Red Guard publications, is impressive. In general, the issues of class background, political activism, and academic achievement created the context in which conservative and rebel Red Guard factions were formed and in which they operated. One of the most interesting features of the initial period of the Cultural Revolution was the communication process from center stage (Beijing) to

periphery (Canton). Beijing Red Guards moved to Canton and imposed a strict compliance with blood-line theory.

Later, on discovery that in Beijing this theory was being openly criticized, their rebel opponents acquired the necessary confidence to articulate a more radical point of view. The realization that an important political issue could be discussed publicly without having been previously resolved provided the rebels with the incentive openly to contest the views of their conservative opponents. Political behavior could be justified, though only if it was modeled after important external examples. With the breakdown of formal communication patterns, such modeling was difficult and had to be expedited through the establishment of informal communication patterns.<sup>7</sup> Frequent Red Guard travel by train to different areas, in order to investigate and bring back firsthand reports about the state of affairs in these areas (*chuanlien*), proved helpful in this regard. The tensions within various factions, and their responses to official attempts to restore social order in the cities and schools, are thoroughly detailed here.

The author's conclusion is that, in the post-Maoist era, since academic achievement has become more pronounced and the issue of class background has been formally deemphasized, the values established by rebel Red Guard factions have been reaffirmed. As with the Shirk thesis, before the conclusion can be substantiated, one would want to learn a great deal more about the policymaking process at the top levels of leadership, with specific reference to historical and factional influences on that policy.

The general reader, lacking a deep background in the field, should be forewarned: there are times when the factual and descriptive nature of this work appears excessive. While the author dutifully comments on the strategies leaders of various units used in promoting their own interests, one would have welcomed a little more discussion concerning the dynamics of inter-factional debate between leaders and followers, activists and fellow travelers, proponents and opponents of the direct use of physical violence, et cetera. Nonetheless, this is an important work, far more deserving of consideration than its "limited" replica edition status might lead one to expect.

*Education under Mao: Class and Competition in Canton Schools, 1960–1980* is a more general work surveying educational change from the pre-Cultural Revolution era through the post-Gang of Four era. Of particular interest is the author's belief that by the mid-1960s the People's Republic of China was caught in the same bind facing other less developed countries—education was developing more rapidly than were job opportunities. Indeed,

<sup>7</sup> The lack of officially sanctioned, formal channels of communication created a situation whereby even Mao himself initiated directives without being able to predict with certainty their outcome. See Lowell Dittmer, *Lio Shao-chi and the Chinese Cultural Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974).

it was the increased competition for entrance into higher educational institutions that raised the possibility that class background, as an alternative admission criterion, be given due consideration. During the pre-Cultural Revolution era, options that were originally designed as alternatives to the formal educational system (such as half work-half study [*minban*] schools) became assimilated into the system and perpetuated existing elitism by offering losers little more than the educational choices popularly labeled “second rate.”<sup>8</sup> Given the historical importance attached to rote memorization and compulsory testing, the Maoist impatience with these evolutionary attempts at educational reform was understandable. Nonetheless, such impatience ultimately proved counterproductive, for during the Cultural Revolution era, when radical educational change was prescribed, the groundwork for the new system was poorly laid.

With the shortening of middle schooling, the stress placed on teaching within interdisciplinary modes, and the increased emphasis on directing students to manual labor experiences, delinquency increased and educational quality quickly eroded. Teachers, psychologically affected by the abuses of the initial Cultural Revolution years, refused to teach enthusiastically material construed as potentially unacceptable. Thus, the tremendous push for achievement characterizing schooling in the post-Maoist era must be placed in the historical perspective of the failures of the mid-1970s.

There is much here with which one must agree, for when schools are forced to perform custodial functions only, they are robbed of their sense of purpose and perpetuate a hypocrisy which all educational actors, including students, can clearly see. Nevertheless, one wonders whether extrinsic and intrinsic reward systems are as mutually exclusive as the author and his informants would have us believe. In the mid-1960s, the drive to succeed on the part of children from lower-class backgrounds, who had little chance of continuing their education at the university, cannot be explained solely in terms of extrinsic motivation. Whether or not during the 1970s regular schools were actually worse than their *minban* counterparts is subject to question. Thus, one must admit the possibility that other factors, such as poor teacher training, large class sizes, and inadequate curricular plans, had an equally negative influence on student behavior as did the interpretation of higher education through the implementation of the compulsory sending of youth to the countryside.

One might quibble a bit with the author’s view that the radical ideology was distrustful of technological expertise. The Maoist developmental model, at least epistemologically, was based on a set of principles inherently

<sup>8</sup> Documentation of this process within the Shanghai environment is presented in Lynn T. White, *Careers in Shanghai* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

different from Western assumptions (inductive vs. deductive investigation, economy of operating scale, unification of theory and practice and of manual and mental labor, labor intensive vs. capital intensive, etc.). When one argues about issues of educational quality and the destruction of quality control within the Chinese system serious questions arise concerning the definition of educational purpose and the criteria by which quality is determined (usually by the ruling elites at any specific time). It may not have been simply that Maoist radicals consciously sought to destroy existing educational quality as much as that their policy represented an effort to redefine purpose; it is according to their own criteria that they can and should be criticized.

As long as educational reforms were implemented through coercive methods, they could never have been associated with nor attractive to the broad support base of teachers, administrators, parents, students, et cetera, necessary for reform of an educational system which historically had promoted structural inequality. Because teachers, as well as students, identified the importance of their roles solely on the basis of the authority given to their respective positions, there was little chance that a shared sense of educational purpose could be articulated or agreed on. Opposing substantive change from the start, teachers never allowed the new system to develop properly.

A case can, in fact, be made that in the long term the need for Cultural Revolution-type reforms may become increasingly self-evident, if one considers the potentially negative consequences of the current adherence to previous elitist practices. These policies should be seen in light of their exacerbation of urban-rural structural inequalities in a society which continues to pay symbolic loyalty to egalitarian ideals. Certainly the apparent ease with which attempts at educational reform were subverted raises questions about the perpetuation of class conflict within the People's Republic of China as spelled out in educational terms—questions which deserve further scrutiny. Adequate answers to these issues cannot be found by blaming the policies of one era for the dilemmas of another or by basking in the failures of the Cultural Revolution reforms, while suspending critical judgment of the weaknesses of current policies.

What can be concluded about these three works is that they represent the strengths and weaknesses within the growing field of Chinese education. Shirk's work gives us insight into the nature of peer group relations and CYL activity during the early and mid-sixties; Rosen amply documents the specific nature of, and ensuing pressures for, Red Guard factionalism during the beginning of the Cultural Revolution; and Unger offers the reader a good general account of the recent history of educational change in the People's Republic of China. At the same time, it is obvious that there will be need for more microstudies in areas other than Canton;

more work concerning rural education, as well as more comparative study; more review of the China model, with specific reference to the debate over education and national development; and comparison of the twists and turns of Chinese educational policy with those of other countries. There is no doubt that we now have a substantive body of knowledge from which to conduct further research. Because these three works have contributed significantly to that foundation, we have been particularly critical. They are important works and should be read by all those concerned with comparative education and development education in general and with Chinese studies in particular.