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China's Keypoint Schools: A Means for Inclusion of the Elite?

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A common contention, especially among conflict theorists, is that one of the more important functions educational institutions perform is their contribution to the social reproduction of various elites. Students are socialized into performing educational roles which are viewed as complementary to their family background and social status and are also channeled into a specific set of curricular and instructional environments which seek to make the perpetuation of their social status a strong probability. When educational institutions confer credentials upon a select number of beneficiaries of similar socio-economic status, they objectify and therefore legitimize social inequality. (1) Individual success stories which are exceptions to the rule serve further to mask existing inequalities or, in the case of academic promotion, fuel an educational system with the talented manpower necessary to guarantee its continued preservation without challenging existing class relationships. (2) Much of the research conducted on this topic has centered around schooling in capitalist societies and only a limited amount of research has been done on elitist schooling patterns in the People's Republic of China. (3)

This study will analyze specific issues concerning the relationship between education, elite recruitment and reproduction and political leadership in China by examining "keypoint schools," special schools which are better funded and staffed, that tend to draw a high proportion of the children of the elite. This topic is of particular interest given China's widespread student demonstrations of 1986 and the ensuing campaign against "bourgeois liberalization" conducted by party conservatives. Therefore, some effort will also be made to frame these events within a larger theoretical context. We will use Kenneth Jowitt's theoretical model of stages of development within Communist societies, to determine whether or not the keypoint schooling process fits into his notion of "inclusion" as the final stage of development.

The thirty-eight year history of the People's Republic of China has been characterized by widely divergent policy aims, reflecting at various times official commitments to ideological orthodoxy on the one hand, or bureaucratic efficiency on the other hand. Indeed, Franz Schurmann's characterization of the 1950s and 1960s as entailing conflict between proponents of "redness" (ideological purity) and "expertness" has served as a useful conceptual framework that sinologists have found quite attractive. (4) Various mobilization campaigns such as the Hundred Flowers (1956), Great Leap Forward (1958-1959), Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) and, more recently, the Four Modernizations (1978-present), reflect divergent ideological propensities but have in common the effort to penetrate and influence the body politic at local levels. Thus, in a broad sense, the notion of inclusivity,
regardless of its specific expression at a particular time, seems to have general salience for modern China.

Periodically the party leadership has viewed it as in the country's economic interest to raise the social status of intellectuals and use their expertise for the purpose of advancing the country's modernization drive. Few examples illustrate the contemporary effort to appease the interests of the intellectual elite as graphically as does the policy of keypoint schools (zhongdian xueiao), a policy which will be examined in some detail with specific reference to recruitment and enrollment, and curricular and occupational considerations.

Chinese elitist schooling patterns did not originate with the post-Mao leadership, but instead reflect the influence of significant cultural borrowing, conducted by Chinese educators throughout the twentieth century. During the early part of the century, educational reformers borrowed heavily from Japanese, American, and European models in order to create a suitable replacement for the traditional Confucian examination system, abolished in 1905. Later, during the 1950s, the Soviet model was copied, particularly at higher educational levels.(5) In spite of the professed aims of such borrowings, the perpetuation of elitism often occurred.

When the Communists came to power in 1949, they inherited a 6-3-3 elementary and secondary level educational system which was generally functional only in urban settings. The establishment of minban (half-work, half-study) schools in rural areas and in selected urban neighborhoods during and after the Great Leap Forward, reflected a commitment to Maoist egalitarian experimentation, initially conducted in Yan'an in the 1930s. However, by the early 1960s minban schools, which relied extensively upon local funding for their support, came to represent the lowest rung on an increasingly stratified educational ladder.(6) The more elite middle schools, on the other hand, later pejoratively labeled "treasure pagodas," maintained their prestige by publicizing their success rates in enrolling graduates in universities.(7) Increasing pressure for access into higher educational institutions was met with the enunciation of conflicting policies concerning university recruitment that not only reflected ideological ambiguity in defining issues of class consciousness and class background, but also created much of the Red Guard resentment which expressed itself openly during the initial years of the Cultural Revolution.(8) Cultural Revolution reforms represented a final comprehensive effort at equalizing the educational pyramid, and included official policies such as expanding the number of middle schools in rural areas, combining manual and mental labor within the normal school curriculum, abolishing compulsory examinations as a prerequisite for graduation, making political criteria the primary determinant for university entrance and, of course, sending large numbers of urban high school graduates to the country-side for prolonged periods of time for the supposed purpose of raising their class consciousness. Since the Cultural Revolution, the re-establishment of a nation-wide university entrance examination system, provincially administered in 1977 and centralized in 1978, and the designation of selected educational institutions as "keypoints," without a doubt has had the effect of resurrecting the educational pyramid.
Broadly defined, keypoint schools are those which receive extra funding, attract the best students and teachers, and receive the newest equipment. They are hierarchically organized at national, provincial, municipal, and local levels, with those institutions serving the larger geographical area often being afforded greater status. Keypoints exist at the primary, secondary and university levels.

When keypoint schooling policies were initially formulated in 1978, they bore a close resemblance to efforts before the Cultural Revolution. Thus many of the twenty primary and secondary level schools which were designated as national keypoints were those which had enjoyed favorable reputations before the Cultural Revolution. At the same time though, some of the designated keypoints were attached to model work units that gained prominence as exemplars of egalitarian reform during the Cultural Revolution. During Hua Guo Feng's brief tenure, the inherent elitism within the keypoint structure was not admitted. Schools which were so designated were expected to share experiences with their less fortunate counterparts, setting a positive example from which non-keypoints could learn. The ultimate goal was eventually to increase the number of keypoint schools throughout the country. (9) It is not surprising that officials in backward areas saw it in their interest quickly to establish keypoints as a means of raising the general level of local support for educational institutions of all types. (10)

Since Deng Xiaoping's rise to power in 1978 there has been a dramatic change in focus, as efforts have been made to limit the number of designated keypoints so as to guarantee a larger measure of quality control. The claim that the keypoint schools were simply model establishments has been dropped, as have official pretensions that they were really egalitarian. (11)

Such a general trend, which re-emphasizes the importance of rigidly defined structural differentiation, has not met with universal acceptance. Keypoint middle schools were forced, for example, to mute their overt attempts at gaining favorable publicity when renewed criticisms were voiced concerning the newspaper publication of university entrance rates in the early 1980s. Now such institutions rely more heavily upon the informal grapevine for propagandizing their success. As certain middle schools became adept at coaching their students to pass the university entrance examination, surpassing the results of older keypoints with a stronger tradition of excellence, a number of officials lobbied for the elimination of the keypoint designation altogether. (12)

In spite of such criticism, the keypoint school concept remains entrenched as a central part of educational policy. Recent changes in policy, such as the promotion of feeder school relationships between senior middle schools and universities so as to bypass the examination process in a few instances, or the granting of greater administrative autonomy to selected university officials, particularly with respect to recruitment policies, have served to enhance rather than restrict their institutional importance. Minor educational reforms, such as the banning of oral examinations as a precondition for admission into keypoint primary schools or the elimination of entrance examinations for non-keypoint junior level
middle schools, fail to challenge the basically elitist character of the country's educational system in a total sense. (13)

The keypoint structure must be understood within the greater context of such elitism. As a large number of ordinary middle schools have been forced to transform themselves into institutions offering a secondary vocational curriculum, their students' futures are adversely affected. In rural areas, the completion of vocational agricultural training will not permit the aspiring student to obtain a more desirable urban job and in urban areas, where youth unemployment and underemployment remain important social problems, only university graduates can be guaranteed work in state-sponsored enterprises where security is ensured. It should be noted that keypoint schools, which offer aspiring students their best chance at obtaining university entrance, are attended by no more than ten to twenty percent of the student population. At Fudan University, one of the country's best higher educational institutions, seventy percent of the students came from key middle schools in 1980. (14)

Model curricular plans rarely reflect the diversity and unevenness of actual practice but they are informative insofar as they illustrate the intentions of educational policy makers. A 1982 working draft programming instructional time for keypoint, ordinary, and vocational agricultural senior middle schools in the city of Guangzhou suggested that keypoint students receive an extra three to eight hours per week of instruction in traditional academic disciplines; their counterparts in other schools would spend more time in manual labor activity, vocational and technical classes. Given the penchant for disciplinary specialization during the last three years of schooling, such policies guarantee that issues of career aspiration and career choice are effectively and permanently decided upon at age fifteen, if not before. (15)

On October 14, 1980, the Ministry of Education issued with State Council approval a "Resolution on How Successfully to Run Keypoint Middle Schools by Stages and in Groups." One of its recommendations was that key middle schools should have no more than eighteen to twenty-four classes, with class size being restricted to forty to fifty students. (16) It was hoped that these limits, along with the differential allocation of resources and facilities which has been previously mentioned, would effectively distinguish true keypoint environments from the norm.

Many of these actual recommendations were followed at the Middle School attached to the South China Teacher's College, regarded as one of the best keypoints in Guangdong Province, and visited by this author on March 19, 1983. The school enrolled 1700 students aged twelve to eighteen who were divided into six classes per grade, with class size being limited to fifty students per room. One hundred thirty teachers and administrators were employed by the school; all of the teachers were teacher college graduates. Student teachers enrolled at the parent institution received their field experience at the middle school. In addition to the operation of normal administrative organs, a research division divided into humanities and science interests was designed specifically with the purpose of encouraging reform and raising the quality of instruction.
Curricular offerings reflected a widely-shared bias in favor of the sciences: mathematics, chemistry and physics along with Chinese language and literature were considered core subjects, repeated each semester. Other offerings which were taught less frequently included music, physical education, history, geography, art, biology and foreign language (English or Japanese). As a residential school with a large boarding facility, the institution was able to impose a rigorous schedule upon its students. The school day began at 6:15 a.m. and ended at 5:05 p.m. Six to seven different subjects were taught daily over a five and one-half day week with the total number of instructional hours per week set at twenty-nine. Finally, it should be emphasized that pressures for achievement intensify as students proceed from the junior middle to the senior middle school level. Of the students entering the senior middle school, thirty to forty per cent are from the outside, meaning that over one-third of the students who were in the junior middle school were forced to transfer to less prestigious institutions.

This foreign observer was struck by the resources and facilities which set the Middle School attached to the South China Teachers' College apart from the norm: a language laboratory facilitating Japanese language instruction is quite impressive when one considers the continued difficulty confronting ordinary schools within the province that were attempting to offer suitable instruction in Mandarin (as opposed to Cantonese). Of perhaps even greater interest is the degree to which elitism has a cross-cultural dimension. As is the custom at many prestigious keypoint institutions, officials at the Middle School charged fees for allowing foreign visitors to observe their facility and interview their staff. School officials were shocked that I came to their institution by public transportation and did not have access to a limousine. Given the fact that during the previous week they had entertained the late Admiral Hyman Rickover, their confusion was somewhat understandable. It should be noted finally that the school was one of the few in the entire country to establish a relationship with a United Nations group and officials were naturally quite proud of this connection. As beneficiaries of an educational structure set within an environment where normal geographical and occupational mobility is severely restricted, educators and students at the Middle School attached to the South China Teachers' College were afforded a distinct privilege by being able to cultivate extensive foreign contact, a privilege normally reserved for university faculty and selected students.

An American teacher who taught at the Shanghai Foreign Language School, one of the city's twenty-six municipal keypoint middle schools, noted a similar sense of privilege, shared by faculty, students and parents. As one faculty member reported to her:

There are really two basic reasons why parents want their kids to come here. First, it's a kind of honor. Only the best and the brightest are accepted and by coming here students already have a foot in the Institute's door. So the parents don't have to spend nights worrying about what their children's futures will be. A fairly good one is already assured. The other one is also an important consideration. That is, since this is a boarding school, their responsibility for looking after their children daily is gone. They give the child to the school, can save up time and energy for the weekend, and it is really not that much more
expensive. The kids would have to eat at home too. The children's lives are looked after carefully and they are not running out on the street. Parents miss their children of course, but now they don't have to worry. (17)

Thus keypoint schools can be viewed as institutions that attract the children of the urban, educated elite and, by providing them with an education perceived as being superior, perpetuate their privileged social status. An important question for consideration concerns the extent to which keypoint schooling policies support the goals of the country's party leadership. Can the regime in fact, effectively use keypoint schools as a means of drawing the intellectual elite into the remaking of modern China?

A brief analysis of the work of Kenneth Jowitt may be helpful in answering this question. Jowitt has argued that Leninist regimes including that of the People's Republic of China exhibit similar developmental characteristics as they mature. He specifically identifies a three stage process which characterizes the aims of such governments: transformation of the old society, consolidation of the new regime, and inclusion. It is his notion of inclusivity which is of crucial importance here.

The task of inclusion refers to a ruling Leninist party's perception that the major condition for its continued development as an institutionalized charismatic organization is to integrate itself with, rather than insulate itself from its host society. More specifically, it involves a Leninist party's attempt to devise a new role and set of institutions that allow for a more effective mediation between the status of party apparatchik and formal party membership or nonparty status. It refers above all to an attempt to expand membership in the regime in a way that allows politically co-opted social elite or activists to maintain their social-occupational identity and the party apparatus to maintain its institutionalized charismatic status.

The process of expanding membership has typically included expanding the boundaries of the regime's productive and decision-making systems along with the internal boundaries of the political system itself. The most dramatic instance of the latter phenomenon has been the admission of a wide range of social elites to consultative status in sociopolitical activities. Stable expansion of a political system's membership base indicates a political elite's recognition of the need to respond to previously excluded distrusted sectors of the population. (18)

There are two major problems in applying the Jowitt model to the People's Republic of China. First, Jowitt sees the stage of inclusion as having two aspects: reaching out to the masses and drawing in established elites. However, the very notion of inclusivity as a homogeneous stage of development is difficult to apply to China, given the Chinese experiences with mass mobilization efforts. Jowitt views mass mobilization campaigns as one for modernization, reflecting party efforts to broaden their base of support. In his view, mass mobilization is a preliminary form of inclusion and, while he admits that such campaigns may be antagonistic to the goal of achieving ultimate inclusivity, he does not
regard them as being antithetical to that goal. However, in the Chinese context, mass mobilization campaigns were often sharply anti-elitist and anti-intellectual; we do not lack for examples of excesses directed specifically against intellectuals and their families during the Cultural Revolution. Public humiliation, enforced incarceration, and consignment to arduous manual labor activity were common experiences of many of China's intellectuals, in an environment where anyone associated correctly or incorrectly with social privilege was subject to severe attack.(20) Even if one were to alter Jowitt's time frame so as to categorize the post-Mao era as China's first true period where inclusivity has been promoted,(21) the concept must be qualified because of the periodic attempts on the part of the party officials to stifle literary expression and limit intellectual dissent during the past decade, as demonstrated again by recent events.(22) It should be remembered that commitments to economic reform in China have not been accompanied by any appreciable diminution in the party control over every day life.

Second, at the highest levels, it is difficult to substantiate clear differences between the roles of establishment or party-affiliated intellectuals and those who express themselves with a seemingly more independent voice. The Confucian political culture which has traditionally viewed the intellectual, regardless of official position, as possessing inherent moral and political authority remains quite powerful. In addition, the cultivation of fruitful client-patron relationships which often have political implications is considered to be acceptable practice. Because the exercise of artistic expression in literature, the fine arts, the humanities, sciences, etc., has inherent political meaning, neat attempts to delineate elites into official and non-official roles can be problematic.(23)

This is not to say that differences, real or perceived, do not exist between individuals with intellectual (as opposed to party or cadre) family background. Quite the contrary is true and those with intellectual class backgrounds do seek to distinguish themselves from their peasant and worker counterparts on the basis of the labor in which they engage (mental vs. manual), their parents' educational background and their own commitment to using education as a vehicle for upward mobility.(24) In the People's Republic of China differences between party members and intellectuals duly correspond to the usual party-worker or managerial-professional conflicts endemic to socialist societies of all types.(25) What is important to remember for our purposes though, is that in China the notion of "expertise" in the functional sense has inherent political connotation.

Thus, the Jowitt model, originally drawn with specific reference to the Soviet Union, does not correspond entirely to the Chinese case, but its general applicability remains clear, especially with respect to keypoint schooling practices and the leadership's attempt to promote modernization.

In this regard, it is fascinating to note that research conducted by Chinese scholars demonstrates that the keypoint middle school experience does indeed have a significant effect upon student attitudes, but that it may not be the effect the party leaders would like. What the research shows is that students in keypoint schools develop individualistic and instrumentalist views, rather than ideologically correct ones. In one survey for example,

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keypoint middle school students were found to be more likely than their counterparts at ordinary middle schools to express ideals which were "vague and indistinct," or which lacked "consciousness" and that these ideals would "sometimes vacillate." (26) This result differs dramatically from the more distinct, altruistic set of values the current leadership hopes to inculcate in the country's future leaders. The promotion of elitist schooling practice in a country with professed socialist values can only be rationalized by the expectation that the cultivation of individual expertise will be of benefit to the larger population. If students fail to see their own role in these terms, the possibilities for achieving inclusivity appear to be limited.

It should be noted that middle school students of all types express negative attitudes with respect to political courses (by far the least popular subject matter within schools) and humanities offerings (whose content is thought to lack objectivity, demonstrating susceptibility to undue political influence). (27) In a similar vein, science and engineering professions are rated by students as being most popular, worker professions less so and peasant activity is associated with the least desirable form of employment. A general denigrating of the importance of manual labor as reflected in the differential status accorded various curricular offerings within the educational system does appear to influence individual career aspirations as well as political activity. (28)

For the most part, those who succeed within China's educational system are young, urban, apolitical and male (only twenty-four per cent of the country's university students are female). (29) They have used the hidden privileges of family background (intellectual parents being more likely to push their children to succeed) as a means of obtaining work which will provide greater personal security, less manual effort and a somewhat greater degree of personal freedom, especially with respect to foreign contact. Given the country's tumultuous past, such yearnings, particularly on the part of intellectuals are understandable. Thus, the China case presents the Jowitt thesis with a serious contradiction: the creation of a stratified educational system in the People's Republic of China has not simply served to appease the interests of intellectual elites but has undermined the very legitimacy of orthodox political activity of all types, a price paid in practical terms by unsuccessful Communist Youth League recruitment efforts. (30)

How then, can one explain the recent expression of political discontent on the part of the country's students and the ensuing attempt to clamp down on dissent through the campaign against bourgeois liberalization? First of all, it should be noted that in 1986, student protest was often ill-defined. According to an official chronology, student concerns as disparate as the policy of compelling students to participate in morning physical exercises to the quality of canteen food, fueled initial dissent on a number of campuses in November. One month later, students at Hefei's China University of Science and Technology criticized the lack of democratic practice in the election of deputies to the district People's Congress in Hefei. Thus, a movement which was originally restricted to personal complaint grew to the point where it encapsulated widespread social grievance, expressed in calls for greater democratization of the country's political process.
Second, higher level party officials themselves had previously called for reform of the political process and in so doing, attempted to promote inclusivity, defined of course on their own terms. To some extent, intellectuals who publicly advocated greater democratization such as Fang Lizhi (Vice-President of Hefei's China University of Science and Technology) and his student supporters, misread the political tea leaves in arguing that "students are a progressive force for democratization" and "Chinese intellectuals should demonstrate their own strength."(31) What these events signify to an even greater extent though, was the inability of both party officials and anti-establishment students and intellectuals to compromise so as to promote true inclusivity.

The difference between China's Democracy Movement of 1979-1980 and the 1986 student demonstrations is therefore striking, for in the former case, disillusioned former Red Guard activists continued to express their loyalty to party authority in arguing for fundamental reform. Their influence was perceived as dangerous insofar as it may have adversely affected the opinions of regular party members. However, the beliefs which were expressed were not considered heretical in and of themselves.(32) Although amorphous in nature, the student demonstrations of 1986 expressed themselves in slogans and demands which went beyond acceptable ideological parameters, hence the necessity for the follow up attack on bourgeois liberalization.

A final point concerns the strength and longevity of the 1986 protests. Officials point out that only one per cent of China's students actually participated in the demonstrations, although as a result of such participation Hu Yao Bang, the second most powerful official in the country and Deng Xiaoping's heir apparent, was forced to resign. But within three months the unrest subsided, the result of public denunciations of leading intellectuals such as Fang Lizhi, Liu Binyan and Wang Ruowang, the ouster of Hu Yao Bang, and the concerted efforts to control student activity. These efforts included the threat of withholding suitable job placement upon graduation to unrepentant student activists, so economic considerations seemed to have played some role in the curtailment of the demonstrations.

There is little doubt that there are dangers confronting the country's central leadership in its attempt to redefine ideological commitment by using the vocabulary of modernization.(33) The leadership has concluded that modernization cannot occur without relying upon the expertise of the country's intellectual elites and has conceived an educational structure that intensifies existing conflicts and limits the scope of active participation in the country's modernization drive to the very few. Recent events have demonstrated that while educational reform may have been instigated with the intention of promoting inclusivity, the results may prove to be antithetical. The result may be a hastening of ideological rigormortis and an inability of orthodox party-affiliated elites to make accommodation with their antagonistic intellectual counterparts, who continue to express their loyalty to a self-defined political culture. Keypoint schools have not only played an important role in the shaping of that culture but, in doing so, have promoted significant barriers to the achievement of inclusivity within modern China. In a small sense,
their existence reflects the existence of those social contradictions which afflict the country as a whole.

ENDNOTES


(10) "Muster Strength to Run a Number of Key Middle Schools With Success" (Jizhong liliang banhao yipi zhongdian zhongxue), *Guangming Ribao* (Aug, 1980) 1, translated in *Chinese Education* Vol. XVII, no. 2 (Spring, 1984), 46-49.

(12) Rosen, "Editor's Introduction," 9-10; "A Middle School of Non-Key Status Has Made Good Scores in the College Entrance Examination for Several Years Running" (Fei zhongdian zhongxue gaokao lian hao chengji), Nanfang Ribao (Aug, 1981) translated in Chinese Education (Summer, 1984), 63-65; Pepper, China's Universities, 26-43.


(16) Gao Yuan, "Six Measures to Ensure the Success of Key Middle Schools" (Banchao zhongdian zhongxuede liu tiao cuozhi), translated from Zhongguo Baike Nianjian (China Encyclopedia Yearbook), 476, in Chinese Education (Summer, 1984), 57-60; see also Pepper, China's Universities, 23-24.


